Anarchist-Abolitionist Experimentation

Sea // Fish

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Preface & Dedications

In the time it took to produce this document, the hours spent reading, transcribing, and working my notes into what follows, hundreds of people were killed by the police, in jails, prisons, and detention centers across the prison archipelago. Hence, I can never forget that in making this document, I could have been trying different tactics and strategies to stop the genocidal warfare that is the United States and its prison archipelago (Burton 2023). I cannot dedicate this work to the hundreds, thousands, and millions of lives gone, because they deserve so much more, and more action than this does.

I want to dedicate this to my interlocutors, to my companions, and accomplices, to the anarchists, to the abolitionists, to the anarchist-abolitionists, and especially to the activists who refuse a political label. The ones I love dearly. I want to express love and solidarity to the longtime anarchist prisoners, to the longtime political prisoners, Black, Puerto Rican, Indigenous, and Palestinian especially. I want to thank, and dedicate this work, to the ongoing struggle towards liberation, or rather against annihilation based on settler societies terms. I dedicate this to the people who have lived anarchy, lived abolition, and their fight day in and day out to not adhere to the state and capitals mode of being, that hierarchy of race and labor that is coloniality (Quijano 2000).

I want to fight and love. I want to go back and not write this, so that I could have been there fighting and loving, in all the ways I did not. So that in all the ways I did fight and did love, could be greater in some small way to someone. To those who died fighting, to those who died loving, I can only hope to join you.

Introduction: Anarchism, Abolition, Anarchist-Abolition, and Books

Introduction

The proliferation of anarchist, abolitionist, and anarchist-abolitionist practices, theories and organizations across Turtle Island traces in large part to the 1960s. David Graeber identifies the strands which weave together to form the current strain of anarchism emerging from both the feminist movement of the sixties and the antinuclear movement of the seventies (Graeber 2009: 233-235), while the emergence of the Black Panther Party in the sixties and the Black Liberation Army of the seventies strived towards Black liberation, including a focus on the struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex (Bagby-Williams and Za Suekama 2022; Goonan 2022). The beginning of a global pandemic, and the exacerbation of anti-Black violence in 2020, brought abolition and anarchy into close contact. For the purpose of this ethnography it is crucial to define these terms, anarchist, abolition, and anarchist-abolition, first on a theoretical academic register and second as used amongst my interlocutors, which will emerge through the ethnographic investigation of a City—which will remain unnamed—based anarchist-abolitionist collective sending books to people in prison.

Descriptions of anarchy, abolition, and anarchist-abolition are incommensurable in that one cannot subsume another in terms of both ideology, but also material practices. In the City, one example of an anarchist-abolitionist project exists in “Books Behind Bars”. “Books”, as I will refer to it, is an all-volunteer, nonhierarchical, mutual aid project that sends books to people in prisons and jails across the United States. This project has existed for over twenty years. My

research focuses on this project over the past eight months, from September 2025 to May 2026, and draws from my participation over the past two years. The project is organized around two days of open volunteering every week, with events occurring during and outside of regular open hours. Volunteers, representing many backgrounds and identities, many of whom have direct experience in the carceral system, come from across the city to pack books.

Lit Review and Theory

Prior to introducing the concepts of anarchy, abolition, and anarchist-abolition it is of primary concern to establish the social and material conditions and relationships, the political economy, of the United States within which these political projects emerge. Beginning with the first arrival of European settlers on Turtle Island and Abya Yala—the names to describe the land now known as North/South America outside of settler terminology—Brenna Bhandar argues, correctly, marked an experimental tactic of *legalizing* Indigenous peoples' displacement through the specific and sited construction of *property* (Bhandar 2018). While her argument traces the constructions of legal and property across multiple contexts—including Israel, Australia, and Canada—, I focus on her description of property in the settler society of the United States. Lockean property is specifically tied to the ethnic cleansing of Indigenous people from the land to extract capital in the form of productivity. This Lockean construction of property means, for white settlers, to claim ownership over land, which enslaved Afrikan people labored on meant that Afrikan people had to become chattel and thus property themselves. Through this forced labor relation and construction of property, Blackness as racialized onto all Afrikan people meant to the liberal humanists that Black people themselves could not be human (Wynter 2003). It is

specifically through this formulation, which not only deprived Afrikan people and their descendants from the value of their labor, but also deprived them of the status of human. In Sylvia Wynter's unpublished manuscript *Black Metamorphosis* the site of the plantation serves to separate the human from the human others, thus preserving, a now biological, human as white cis masc bourgeois, both through their purported material status as owners and their ideological status occupying civilized and modern (Wynter 1970s). Both the ideological and material thus implicate each other, Fanon's classic formulation of the colonial context's sub equalling super structure, "The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (Fanon 1961: 40). Wynter argues further, the plantation continues after its so-called abolition, "The ghettoes and prisons of today's North America are the new forms of the plantation archipelago. The new forms of the plantation archipelago are not, as were the old forms, the sites of a system of industrial colonization, but rather are reservations, where those now described as expendable by the system of production can be herded, to repeat in contemporary terms the protracted agony of the American Indian" (Wynter 1970s: 372).

This understanding of the Prison/Plantation as the herding of surplus people finds similar valence in the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore on the prison system of California in *The Golden Gulag*. Wilson contends, "The problem with the 'new slavery' argument is that very few prisoners work for anybody while they're locked up. Recall, the generally accepted goal for prisons has been incapacitation: a do-nothing theory if ever there was one" (Gilmore 2007, 21). Gilmore, focusing on the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) in California, looks at geography in this way through the surplus and crisis model underlying capitalism—that is, in a Marxists fashion, capitalism requires surplus labor value, which in increasing accumulation, leads to the

degradation of the social relations necessary for surplus value—specifically poignant is the surplus laborers, made up of mostly Black and Latinx peoples (55, 88, 111). The state's need to repurpose surpluses, which Gilmore finds in both land and people in 1980s California, into the construction and filling of prisons—at the same time new prisons were being built, offenses were increasing in punitive punishments, such as the infamous "three strikes" law (95-96). The integral synthesis between Wynter and Gilmore is that prisons do not only extract labor, but are compartmentalizations of people and space to which the social relations make possible that Humanity can only be white, masculine, and (petit) bourgeois. The Prison Archipelago coincides with the surplus of Humanity, an excess that must be abject. This is the amputation of the human in Fanon (1952, 140) the cutting out of Blackness from modernity.

The use of the term Prison Industrial Complex points specifically to a paper in 1995 by Mike Davis noting, "An emergent 'prison-industrial complex' increasingly rivals agribusiness as the dominant force in the life of rural California and competes with land developers as the chief seducer of legislators in Sacramento" (Davis 1995). Particularly, this language of "industrial complex" is a direct reference to the Military Industrial Complex which Angela Davis explains, "Because of the extent to which prison building and operation began to attract vast amounts of capital—from the construction industry to food and heath care provision—in a way that recalled the emergence of the military industrial complex, we began to refer to as 'prison industrial complex'" (Davis 2003, 12). The capital which is accumulated by the PIC exists through the labor in maintaining a spatial arrangement of people—looking towards Hortense Spillers that is social, modern bodies in contrast to isolated, imprisoned flesh (Spillers 1987)—under modernity. Both Davis and Gilmore focus on the expansion of prisons in California. During the 1980s,

under the Reagan presidency, the number of prisons in California doubled from nine to eighteen —the original nine prisons were constructed between 1852 to 1955—and in the following decades, into the twenty-first century, this proliferation continued (Davis 2023, 12). While the focus remains on California in these works, we can see this trend on a larger scale across the United States. To understand at greater lengths the alternative political projects to the PIC I turn to defining anarchy, abolition, and anarchist-abolition.

Anarchism, in the register of the scholarship, has largely been taken up by the Occupy Movement of the early 2010s. This is described by authors such as David Graeber, Cindy Milstein, and John Protevi, specifically in the interpretation of prefigurative politics (Graeber 2009, Milstein 2010, Protevi 2011). Milstein describes prefigurative politics as, "the idea that there should be an ethically consistent relationship between the means and ends. Means and ends aren't the same, but anarchists utilize means that point in the direction of their ends" (2010: 68). Milstein goes on to say rather than a finality, "Ends for anarchists are instead the constellation of ethics, tested time and again, that offer greater amounts of lived freedom, even as people continue to fill out what freedom looks like in praxis" (68-69). This critical interpretation of politics and practice resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome", in that specifically, anarchist projects resist overcoding (1985: 9). Crucially, this resistance to finality, or overcoding, is an emergent process as explored at greater length in the first section. Moreover, John Protevi's "Semantic, Pragmatic, and Affective Enactment at OWS" focuses on the aforementioned semantic, pragmatic, and affective mechanisms of Occupy, rather than the ideology of anarchism, to look at the social machines that get overlooked by ideology (Protevi 2011, Delueze and Guattari 1985). This resonates back to David Graeber's analysis on anarchism, in which

anarchist tendencies are rooted, not in thinkers, but in "organizational philosophy and revolutionary practice" (Graeber 2009: 214). This critical praxis of anarchism gives it its political purchase, but also evades its own ideological capture in, what Graeber called, capital A anarchism.

In line with this formulation of anarchy it is integral to discuss the idea of autonomy. In Timothy Weldon's research in an anarchist squat, autonomy is a centered praxis. Weldon shows that "anarchist autonomy… is based on individual autonomous action as a conscientious part of a collective whole and actively factors in the needs and outcomes of that whole within one's individual decisions" (Weldon 2023: 128). That is, an individual's action is understood in how it effects other participants in the space/collective. This definition is significant in the centering of sociality rather than asocial individual action. In this way anarchist autonomy is an ethical practice as part of the social relationships enmeshed in mutual aid, solidarity, and communalism.

Abolition—understood through the works of Angela Davis, Orisanmi Burton, Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, Kathrine McKittrick, and Marquis Bey—engenders transformation beyond the political economy of racial capitalism to an expansive undeterminable world foreclosed by modernity. Specifically, abolition emerges through Black and Feminist liberation projects (Davis et al. 2022). Even more precisely for this thesis and my site, Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) abolition, centers the political project of abolition in the ways prison manifests as the iconic form of racial capital in modernity, engendering specific racialized and gendered identities (Bey 2022, Davis 2022, Gilmore 2007, Wynter 1970s). Abolition takes on the excess, the surplus described by Gilmore and the Plantation Archipelago of Wynter, to engender being that is irreconcilable with modernity. That is the "Plantation Futures" as written by Katherine McKittrick, "I am

suggesting that when the lands of no one were transformed by plantocracy logics, firming up racial hierarchies of humanness, the question of encounter is often read through our present form of humanness, with spaces for *us* (inhabited by secular economically comfortable man and positioned in opposition to the under developed impoverished spaces for *them*) being cast as the locations the oppressed should strive toward" (McKittrick 2013, 9). And the excess of criminality of Harney and Moten, "When governance is understood as the criminalization of being without interests, as a regulation brought into being by criminality, where criminality is that excess left from criminalization, a certain fragility emerges, a certain limit, an uncertain imposition by a greater drive, the mere utterance of whose name has again become too black, too strong altogether" (Harney and Moten 2013: 57). Abolition marks a refusal to the material and logical constructions of modernity and for the expansive modes of being, emerging outside and in spite of modernity.

Abolition introduces an understanding of care. In Angela Davis et al.'s *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* they put forward a "Strategy: Care Not Cops" saying, "Abolitionist campaigns against new jails or other forms of carceral expansion and criminal legal reform intersect with the material consequences of the state's abandonment of people with diverse needs" (Davis et al. 2022: 66). Hence there is a particular resonance with anarchist focus on mutual aid, care, as strategy, seeks to meet these needs left out by the state. Davis et al. demonstrate "care" being captured by the state and abolitionist praxis is in meeting these needs which the state will not, to create a way of being outside the state institutions of "care".

Following with Davis et al. and others it is important not to idolize projects. As the authors say "We are careful here not to romanticize any network or campaign. People do the

labor and therefore it, like all of us, is always flawed. And a turn to 'the community' is fraught, sometimes mythic: community is at once a radical vision, a fugitive possibility, and a struggle—abolition feminism in practice" (Davis et al. 2022: 14). In a similar vein anarchist projects should not be overly romanticized, nor anarchist-abolition projects. The challenges of praxis inform praxis moving forward, recall the notion of prefigurative politics, the practices require testing and experimentation not finality or closure. I too seek not to romanticize the collective in this ethnography nor their labor.

While there is resonance between anarchy and abolition, informed by Tuck and Yang, and Marquis Bey, there is a needed focus on the incommensurability of these political projects (Tuck and Yang 2012), but also how these projects inform and expand one another as coalition, "Coalition does not necessitate a common plight but a common, if temporarily and intermittently, envisioned future" (Bey 2022: 259-260). In this mode, anarchist-abolition becomes central. This is a specific understanding of anarchy and abolition that does not commensurate the two, but rather refers to a coalitional effort taking on by a specific lineage creating its own mode of engagement (Goonan 2022).

The tradition of anarchist-abolition in the US comes out of the efforts of the Black Radical Tradition, from veterans, political prisoners, and prisoners of war of the Black Panther Party, the Black Liberation Army, and insurrectionary anarchists. Led by Black and self proclaimed anarchists such as Kuwasi Balagoon, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, Martin Sostre, Ashanti Alston, and many others, emerged a focus among US anarchists against the PIC (Bagby-Williams and Za Suekama 2022:20; Goonan 2022). This intersection, however, is under explored. As Goonan (2022:9) brings to our attention, "Another current of abolitionism during

this period that is not significantly discussed in the existing literature is the proliferation of anarchist prison abolitionist organizing and affiliation with the movement against the prison industrial complex". Investigating this lineage, offers insight into how current projects relate to both, anarchy and abolition, not as two distinct lineages, but as a specific lineage of anarchist-abolition, which remains limited in its engagement by academics. Rather than trace the historical record—as Goonan (2022:7) shows exists primarily in "…grassroots political texts produced through years of collective struggle and analysis"—, I look towards one of these projects reoccurring practices and labors.

Anarchist-abolition for this thesis is thus best understood through its enactment, that is its praxis. Similar to how anarchism uses ethical prefiguration, anarchist-abolition draws from this lineage to specifically consider navigating means that lead towards (PIC) abolition. To establish a base for the discussion on decision-making it is of primary importance to understand what Books does, how it is aligning action with anarchist-abolitionist ideology.

Introducing the Collective: Books

Books is a mutual aid project based on the labor of volunteers, Dean Spade provides a workable definition of mutual aid, "Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them" (Spade 2020). Books takes on the understanding that people in prison have needs and one of these needs is literature. As my interlocutor Elm, a middle aged, white, cis, masc person who is formerly incarcerated, put it, "The reality is that there is a lack of educational material behind bars. People do not have access to the information they are looking for and we take it for granted

out here." The prison population is restricted in their access of literature, in ways that often feel inconsistent, random, and spiteful. In letters I have read from people in prison, they express how important books are, from challenging their cases, or as a small means to escape the razor wire and concrete that surrounds them, at least in the mind. Books works to meet these needs.

From the appearance of the decor in Books's space it is clear participants relate to anarchism and abolition. There are banners with circled As and lists of political prisoners on the walls and core volunteers describe the project, and themselves, as both abolitionist and anarchist. While participants are informed by both of these ideologies, and enact practices that are done in both, I posit, this project and its participants exist in the praxis of anarchist-abolition specifically, in large part due to the focus on prisons, but also through the impact of currently and formerly incarcerated people on this project. Throughout this ethnography, I argue that through collective and autonomous decision-making the core volunteers of Books experiment, through the iterative and discursive practice of making decisions, towards ethical prefiguration. To argue this I first look towards the core groups taking on a consensus based decision-making process for collective meetings. By navigating consensus decision-making, as a structure, the collective centers the consent of members (core-volunteers) in an attempt to not only distribute authority horizontally, but also to enact web of social relations built from care. To understand this process I look at how the consensus process came to be practiced, some decisions made using this process, and the social cohesion which makes consensus possible. I then look at autonomous projects as another decision-making mode within Books. I look at the projects taken on by core volunteers and how autonomy becomes valued and exists with, and not in spite of, consensus. In doing so, I show autonomous decision-making works as a collective obligation, participation in Books is

facilitated by, not only the option to act autonomously, but as an ethical obligation to act. Lastly, I look at the effect letters from people in prison have on the decision-making process of Books. In this section I focus on how core volunteers bring in communications with people in prison to make decisions and how these letters and communications are essential to the project. This leads to showing how letters influence decision-making within the collective, expanding the assemblage of obligations necessary for Books to operate.

Books centers a practice of do-it-yourself (D.I.Y), as another interlocutor of mine Maple, a middle aged, Asian, cis, femme exclaimed during the projects move to a new space, "D.I.Y till we die" while making a ramp out of discarded plywood to move heavy objects down the stairs. This points to the larger notion of "solidarity not charity", since all the volunteers at Books are unpaid, most people being working class and university students, there is almost no money in this project, relying on the labor and social networks of the volunteers.

Over the course of my time at Books we moved from a low cost squat to renting a small space in the Southwest side of the City. When one arrives at the building, rings the doorbell, then treks up a flight of stairs until reaching a hallway with a large iron clad door making it to Books. The hallway is lined with shelves carrying books and a handmade rack carrying zines. Entering into Books one sees the shelves lining almost the entire space. Books of various genres fill them from mystery thrillers, science fiction, manga, and fantasy to books on anarchism, marxism, cultural studies, and abolition, and everything between and beyond. Above the shelves are provocative anti-state and anti-prison slogans and art. In the far left corner from the entrance is a large printer, capable of stapling and folding zines and literature. On the back wall under the

window are stacks of semi-complete packages, only needing to be given postage and quality assured.

The open-hours are where most, but not all labors occur. When a volunteer arrives they are provided an introduction as follows, first there is a table near the entrance with stacks of letters from various prisons sorted by jurisdiction (by state or federal for prisons and by county for jails). After choosing a letter and looking at the accompanying restriction (if hardcover is allowed and the number of books allowed) the volunteer is prompted to read the letter, then choose the maximum number of books that fit with the requests and restrictions. The step of choosing books is typically the longest step as people often have specific request and may require printing the literature into a zine. Once the books are gathered, the volunteer grabs a receipt, writes the book titles and a short message on the receipt, and then puts the receipt and books into a shipping back. The last step is to lightly tape the package, affix the envelope with the letter to the package with tape—so that when a core volunteer does shipping they have the return address—, and place the package into a box in the far side of the room. While volunteers are putting packages together, core volunteers are typically either also putting together packages or printing shipping labels onto the packages. The last step of this entire process is for a core volunteer or entrusted volunteer to deliver the packages to a post office to be sent to the person in prison.

Volunteers who frequently show up and work are given “core volunteer” membership, similar to the term “bottom-liners” (Giles 2023). Bottom-liners are participants, in mutual aid projects, who commit to the labor of ensuring these projects continue. Giles’s bottom-liners are those in Food Not Bombs (FNB) collectives who arrive every week early to cook before

distributions, or the person who ensures there is food repatriated from “trash”, the abject materialism of modern capitalism (Giles 2023: 13, 86). FNBs are organized in a similar fashion to Books there is an emphasis on anarchism, D.I.Y, and creating direct means to meet people’s needs—in the case of FNBs, providing a hot meal or groceries. In the case of Books these are people who open the space for volunteering, purchase or repatriate materials, pick up letters, or drop off packages at the mail center—amongst many other labors explored throughout this ethnography.

Consensus Decisions, the Obligation of the Individual

Introduction to Consensus at Books:

The book *Mutual Aid* by Dean Spade began creeping up in conversations around formalizing a decision making process in late September. During this time Books had recently moved to a new space. New core members were being added while seven of us had been core members before, though three, including myself, were only core members in the old space for three months before moving. In this ethnography I discuss eleven, including myself, core members. Before I joined, Elm, Maple, Oak, and Cherry were core members. At the time all were in their late thirties, Elm and Cherry are brothers who grew up in the South suburbs of the City, they are white, both working class, and both formerly incarcerated. Maple is a Korean femme lawyer, who grew up in Southern California before coming to the City. Oak is Mexican masc working class migrant, who grew up in the Southside of the City. I joined during the final few months of Books at the previous space I dub the Refuge. Ash, an Asian working class femme, and two others joined the core group with me, although the two others have since left. Lilac, a white trans femme union organizer from Atlanta, and Leaf, a white working class person, both joined soon before the move. When we moved new members began to be added and as members joined we began to formalize a process of decision-making for the core group. I now turn to some of these discussions.

All of the discussions took place over calls in the core chat, before the move most meetings, I attended, were held in person. The discussions on consensus, the process explored in Spade's *Mutual Aid*, became the foundation to which the collective formulated a formalized

decision-making apparatus. These discussions provide a look into the discursive practice of decision-making, but also the metadiscursive practices of this decision-making structure. What then emerges is both a process of decision-making based on the notion of consensus, but also my interlocutors negotiations with this process. My interlocutors, as will be seen, repeatedly considered how to navigate consensus with individual autonomy.

Elm, who joined Books after being released from prison in 2023, consistently remarked that the group was using the process from before the move and new members were being indoctrinated into a process they did not decide. We began discussing casually the idea of reading *Mutual Aid* to create a new process based on consensus over the summer and into the fall. In mid September, Elm printed copies of *Mutual Aid* and discussed the idea of reading the book together with other core members. I talked with other core-members, started a reading group chat, and scheduled a meeting for us to discuss the book. Spade's chapter five "No Masters, No Flakes" breaks down how to do consensus, practices, and things to keep in mind. There are charts and exercises and we decided to discuss, primarily, that chapter. I sent out dates and times into our chat, found the time most were available, and we got on a call together. I facilitated the discussion, it was my first time doing so. I now turn to the meeting to discuss reading the book.

In early October core members meet on a call to discuss reading Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid* specifically on consensus and sustainability. The meeting began at 7:01 p.m. there were eight participants, myself, Maple, Elm, Oak, Ash, Cherry, Mulberry—a white working class person who recently moved to the City—, and Lilac. I sat on my bed with my printed out copy of

Mutual Aid we had all been given. I reconstruct the dialogue based on my notes and the collective's meetings notes, I began by asking,

Me: "So I hope everyone had a chance to read chapters four and five, and I guess we can start with what are peoples thoughts, reactions, and reflections on those chapters? Or any part of the book?"

Ash: "I found the part on burnout really helpful, recognizing the signs of burnout and the activities really helpful. I definitely see some of my own habits in these and it's good to see techniques and toolkits to help with them."

Elm: "Yea I agree, it's nice to see them laid out"

Oak: "I think that section is really helpful to making sure we do the work and no one takes on too much"

After some additional reflections we moved to discussing consensus. We began by reading the first paragraph of the section "What Is Consensus Decision-Making?"

Me: "So on consensus, what do people think?"

Cherry: "I think the first paragraph under 'What Is Consensus Decision-Making?' Puts it there really well. Does everyone have their copy? I'll read it."

Following Cherry's reading, a specific quote became the center of discussion, "Consensus decision-making happens when everyone in the discussion hashes out possibilities and modifies a proposal until everyone can live with it." (Spade 2020). After Cherry's reading,

Lilac: "I was in a group that did consensus, and it takes a lot of work. It can be slow and challenging and it requires a lot of effort to keep it going. Also it can sometimes make doing things difficult."

Elm: “Definitely, and not all things need to be done by everyone. Like if someone has an idea for something and is there they should be able to do it”

Cherry: “Teams are a good idea. I know we have some teams working on stuff like finances, and that can be useful for maintenance.”

Me: “I’m wondering how we can make sure teams still have autonomy with consensus. I think the Prison Banned Books Week group did a good job of that.”

Maple: “Yea, we should create a proposal folder for guidelines on our drive. Then we can flesh everything we discussed out in writing.”

Mulberry: “I think it’s also important to note that sometimes people don’t want to vote, so it should be clear that not everyone has to vote in every situation. Also not everything needs to go to consensus, we should have some some process to avoid unnecessary voting”

Me: “We should definitely make a proposal and try to have a meeting soon to figure it out. Stand asides also are a good way to generate conversation.”

Lilac: “Exactly, stand asides and blocks are very important in consensus. It makes sure that no one is coerced, but also if someone doesn’t necessarily feel a certain way, then they don’t have to say yes or no and block the proposal.”

Maple: “All of this needs to be in writing, we should have all procedures written down, so it’s as clear as possible what processes we are using.”

Oak: “I’ll make a folder now in our drive so we can work on a proposal to then discuss and, hopefully, vote on.”

Following this meeting a folder and documents were made to propose both a consensus process and community guidelines. After remaining blank for a week, I decided to add some

points, so we would have a proposal to discuss. Since then the discussion has elaborated, edited, removed, and refined certain points, including a section on emergency voting I turn to later.

This introduction to consensus in the group reflects the understandings and evaluations my interlocutors have. The beginning of the conversation reflects the importance of doing work without over extending as Ash, Elm, and Oak expressed. This begins to illicit a socially necessary component of care, a distribution of labor, done by volunteers whose subsistence exists outside of this space.

In the conversation on consensus there is the consideration of an individual's autonomy, specifically picked up by Elm, Cherry, Lilac, and Mulberry. I brought up this notion of autonomy as a few weeks prior Elm and I discussed the article "Tyranny of the Structureless" I elaborate on below, but Elm posed an important question I reiterated in this conversation, how can people feel empowered to act autonomously within a structure of consensus? Cherry's reference to teams, a point discussed with relation to Spade's description, is useful. The idea behind teams, or working groups as used in the proposal, exist to do a particular labor or complete a task. The reference to finances and Prison Banned Books Week exemplify this. The former is a reoccurring group that looks over the finances of the collective, and includes looking for and writing grant proposals and maintaining the expenses. When I joined, the primary writers of grant proposals and handling the expenses was done by Elm and Maple who continue to do much of this labor although Mulberry has also began to take up searching for and applying to grants.

The latter example of Prison Banned Books Week I elaborate further in the discussion of autonomous projects. This example of an autonomous working group works around two specific weeks during the year to raise money and books, once during the aforementioned Prison Banned

Books Week and second during Indie Bookstore Week. These are crucial opportunities for Books to generate income and sustain the project further.

Of crucial importance as Lilac's explanation of stand asides and blocks. Lilac also makes it clear, through there previous experience with consensus, that consensus is challenging. The attempt to describe and enact a model of decision-making that is non coercive is a communal practice, that requires the input and explicit consent of participants. This negotiation is challenging, but as I turn to now, there are some important considerations of how this process can function successfully, specifically as it relates to the social cohesion of the collective.

Recall from the meeting, Spade (2020:38) says, "Consensus decision-making happens when everyone in the discussion hashes out possibilities and modifies a proposal until everyone can live with it. Consensus is cooperative rather than adversarial." This decision-making structure has long fascinated anarchists, especially their forms in Indigenous and Quaker communities in what is now called North America (Graeber 2009:229). The draw for many anarchists to consensus is the necessary condition that everyone must consent to any decision, and in rare cases where that is not possible know have an exact plan for how a quick response is made and by who with accompanying norms of accountability (Graeber 2009: 235, Spade 2020: 44).

At Books consensus is in a peculiar position, while being formalized in the sense that there really is a proposal with multiple points/processes laid out and is being followed, it is also informal in the sense that this proposal has for four months remained a proposal and not been consented on. This is not to bash informality or praise formality, but rather to look at what this does, why it is not consented on, and why that is important for Books, my interlocutors, and

myself. This notion of formality comes from discussions of "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" by Jo Freeman. Writing on the feminist movement of the 60s Freeman critiques the idea of "strurcturelessnes" the informal organizing, that is without a formalized division of labor and decision-making process, of small action oriented groups. Freeman argues that the "structureless" group in fact has a informal elite who maintain authority largely through their social capital (Freeman 1970 [2013]). As a result this has been a reoccurring reference in anarchist spaces, how does one negotiate structurelessness within an anti-authoritarian space? Writings from both academics and anti-authoritarians have negotiated this essay. Many view this as an anti-anarchist essay outright as it has been weaponized by both liberals and socialists alike.

During the outing with Elm when I brought up Freeman's article, Elm focused on the tensions of personal and collective autonomies, "If people want to have their own small projects they should be able to without having to ask everyone". In his response Elm brought up "The Tyranny of Tyranny" an essay written by Cathy Levine in 1974 as a response to Freeman. Levine's essay centers on the possibilities of small groups organizing, as opposed to the large scale movement based organizing Levine (1974 [1979]) aptly describes as patriarchal referring to the movements of the 1960s. Graeber (2009: 234) reads Freeman as suggestions of how anarchists should engage one another, "…clarifying what tasks are assigned to what individuals, finding a way for the group to review those individuals' performance, distributing responsibilities as widely as possible…, ensuring all have equal access to information and resources…" . Both Levine and Graeber focus on a pragmatic reading of Freeman, changing the organizing practices of individuals and groups in their actions. My interlocutors are concerned with formalism as a coercive form labor and decision-making that obfuscates ones individual

autonomy, as Elm described earlier and was reiterated in the initial meeting on consensus. While this concern exists, there has not been, in my time at Books, an actualization of this tension in decision-making. That is consensus has not been a hurdle for core volunteers, or other volunteers for that matter, to exercise their autonomy. To facilitate these tensions is the idea of guidelines, which at Books remain unclear and under-discussed.

In this vein I turn to a discussion in early January. At the tail end of open-hours I asked Elm and Mulberry their thoughts on authority and consensus. Mulberry began by saying, "A lot of the time you don't want authority, but knowledge naturally makes an authority. Like asking Oak about the printer or Elm about zines. Also knowledge can be spread so authority doesn't need to stay concentrated."

Elm: "Naming it [authority] and working against it is an aspiration, as it can be invisible.

Mulberry: "Hierarchy and authority work together, such as people under wage slavery who may not be able to participate because of limited accessibility. I don't stir towards consensus because I feel, if you want to do something you should be able to."

Elm: "Just because I am a part time, working one day a week. This is like my full time job, but does that give me authority? I mean it shouldn't."

Mulberry: "*Emergent Strategy* informs a lot of my thinking. One of the main things is that things should be torn down. It should be okay to tear down things that are not working and rebuild."

Elm: "The community agreements on the wall are from the Refuge with people who aren't here anymore. These guidelines came from things and conversations that were happening then and the situations we were dealing with. The agreements came out of a space that had more projects going on."

Mulberry: “Boundaries are really important. I think of boundaries in terms of bodily autonomy and therefore it is important for those to be clear. People are suffering from PTSD and need emotionally mature people, which requires infrastructure where people have their needs met, which is why mutual aid is so important. Then boundaries become more important and valuable.”

Elm: “Well if people are deterred they can wait until they have the means and then work back to being a part of community. Folks in prison are complicated and how do we facilitate that healing. Reading is one of those things.”

Mulberry: “I’ve realized that patronizing is never going to help, what if we don’t send someone a book because of their past and then they don’t want to be a part of healing later.”

This conversation provides important context and discourse to Books. Mulberry mentions prioritizing boundaries, similar to the idea of guidelines in the collective which Elm takes up to add how the current guidelines warrant a discussion. Unfortunately, as is the case with the broader collective deciding on guidelines, the conversation did not go further in that direction.

Turning to the meta discourse on decision-making during this conversation, Mulberry’s position on consensus versus autonomy illustrates an interesting tension, that consensus and autonomy are not co-constructed, while Mulberry’s description is aspirational it is significant to consider how pragmatically consensus and autonomy work together. As this section and the next claim, pragmatically, consensus and autonomy are constitutive elements which co-construct one another rather than, as necessarily, contradictory ideologies. This discussion also maintains this dual lens, as Mulberry and Elm negotiate what Books does, what it should be doing, and why it matters, in doing so they are describing consensus and autonomy as constituent elements. Take

for example, Elm discussing his labor, as a part time employee Elm is able to offer more time and labor to Books then other working class participants. As Elm expresses, this should not make his position that of authority in relationship to other people's labor and capacity to volunteer. That is, his autonomy should not restrict the autonomy of other participants. That his autonomy should consider the autonomy of others is that others should be able to consent or not, making consensus necessary for his own evaluation of personal and other's autonomy. While I argue that consensus and autonomy have been constitutive there is is still the important consideration of when they could not be. That is as formalized positions, when is consent no longer given in either mode of decision-making.

It is important to extend this analysis to an intersectional approach. Elm is a white masc and is formerly incarcerated. This is a significant point as Maple, who is an Asian femme, often expresses in public posts on the collective's social media and in conversation that mutual aid for people currently incarcerated requires the labor and direct input of (formerly) incarcerated people. It is also important to consider a gendered and racialized distribution of labor, among the core group there are three mascs, five femmes and four who resist interpellation as binary gender subjects. Gender is a significant identity within the collective, specifically as a space that relies on the labors of gender queer, trans, and nonmasc peoples. Taking from an abolitionist and gender focused perspective, mutual aid exists in the implementation and reproduction of care structures as described in the introduction, abolition and feminism are bound up and the labor in these care structures is often done by femmes and gender queer people (Davis et al. 2022). This is a crucial aspect of mutual aid which Books demonstrates, that the practices of mutual aid are distinct from the form of white masculinity that emerges in many radical projects—this is not to

say that femmes, gender queer, and non-white people do not engage in these projects as well, but that their labor is often downplayed in respect to white male gendered performances of militancy (see Webb 2019).

In a similar effect race is a significant aspect of the collective and negotiating the space that is being created. While the collective has members racialized as white, Asian, and Latine, there are currently no Black core members. This has not always been true, but is the case in the current groups dynamic. Race, racism, and antiBlackness have been important aspects of discussion within the collective. Ash, in a conversation on her experience in the collective, asked how a collective of people who are not racialized as Black can ensure the space can resist antiBlackness. Both Elm and Mulberry have described this in interactions before. The issue remains that there is a lack of serious engagement with this assurance, both in terms of creating a space of anti-racism, but also a space in which the participation of people racialized as Black is centered. This is not to say that Books is categorically antiBlack, events often center Black community members and the collective works with other specifically Black collectives, but the issue remains that Books does not have people racialized as Black in the core group.

Race also intersects with the geography of the project, at the Refuge, Books was in a community that was historically white, then became a space of Latine migrants and Asian migrants. Many of the core volunteers lived near the Refuge, now the collective resides in a predominately and historically Black neighborhood in the City. As one former core member remarked in this discussions on race and antiBlackness is the question of how to engage and offer support for the community as well as exist in relationship to the rest of the community rather than as a disconnected entity that could risk being a gentrifying force. These racial and

gendered dynamics underscore the practices of the collective and hence merit this discussion. I now turn to an example of negotiating the consensus proposal in the months following the initial discussion.

During a core meeting call in February we reignited discussion of the consensus proposal. It had been a few months since our last dedicated time spent on this topic. Through what emerged in the meeting, a specific point of "emergency situations" came up. When the point of the consensus proposal was brought up, focus rested primarily on point nine, a clause originally drafted to say "All processes, including this, are subject to modification or even abolishment." At that point the process of modification and abolishment were unclear. Oak brought this point to our attention with the support of Lilac. During the on-boarding process conversation, Oak asked, "should this be a part of the consensus proposal?"

This lead to a conversation on the consensus proposal, where Elm said, "The on-boarding process should be a proposal in its own right. But yea we should finalize the consensus proposal." After revisiting the proposal and it's points, Elm said, "We should use the task list we had before moving platforms to streamline working groups and note what each group is doing and who to contact to get involved."

While viewing the proposal Oak brought up point nine, the emergency clause, "I think we should work on point nine, since it sees to be an emergency clause, and in the past this would have been useful."

Lilac then remarked, "yea, the culture is good right now, but things change and we don't want to be unprepared for an emergency decision." The conversation shifted to exploring the

logistics of an emergency decision through simple versus super majority, time, and briefly on quorum.

Simple versus super majority became the primary conversation point. Ash proposed a two-thirds majority for emergency proposals. Lilac argued that “In an emergency it may be difficult to get two thirds and with time restrictions it might be better to use a simple majority. People should understand the gravity of making an emergency decision, and that it needs to be made.”

Cherry brought up, “The main concern will probably be a small faction of actors who want to make specific change and if we can do a super majority we should, it also means we are trying to get as much consent as possible, especially if it means kicking out a portion of the group.”

Mulberry agreed, “If we do a simple majority then the minority opinion carries a lot of weight, it would honestly make most sense to dissolve if we can’t get a supermajority.” The group was able to agree on the condition of supermajority consenting with nine yeses, the question then came to the notification time for such a meeting and the appropriate quorum. Cherry, Oak, and Mulberry were primarily involved with the point on notification. Initially Oak asked, “Is a three day period enough time? Some matters would be time sensitive, like what if we get evicted?”

Cherry argued, “Three days is super short notice, people will be working and maybe not available, I think if we can we should aim for a week, but no longer. That would gives us time to reach out and make sure everyone has a chance to vote in case of an emergency.”

Mulberry, “We should try to make emergency decisions with as many people involved as we can, I think three days to a week is appropriate to try our best to reach out. Also it should be clear that if someone doesn’t vote then they are counted as abstaining.” The core group decided these parameters were sufficient.

Quorum was only left, Lilac brought up this point, “We haven’t decided a quorum, in general. We should probably come up with something.” But the point was lost as the conversation moved on to discussing the working groups more explicitly and as the meeting had already run long, it was decided to call it there after modifying the consensus proposal.

This meeting’s focus on emergency decision-making provides insights into the assumed limitations of consensus in practice, while also emerging from past tensions, and how to navigate emergencies in the most egalitarian mode, when consensus is not feasible is majority enough or is supermajority required. This also comes from Lilac’s statement on the severity of such a decision, that it should be extremely rare for a decision to require this stipulation. This also points towards the interpretation of the consensus proposal being less temporally grounded, the decision-making process considers possible risks down the line that are not emerging at the moment of their creation. The stalling of the proposal during this meeting came from time limits, more discussion needed to be done to consider the relationship between working groups and consensus.

As this conversation shows as well that for this process to work, especially in emergency situations, individuals need to participate. Returning to the idea of anarchist autonomy, individuals need to consider the collective, and as Cherry, Oak, and Mulberry pushed for there should be an understanding of how long a person should take when a situation arises. Cherry also

bringing up that three days is short notice reflects there status as working class, who may not be able to properly attend to an emergency situation in that time frame. This also provides an understanding that the collective decision-making being formalized here requires Cherry, as an individual, to make clear how they view this process.

Consensus in Practice

I now move to an example of consensus decision-making in practice. Historically, Books offered a service of sending books to the children of people currently incarcerated. During a session of open-hour volunteering I read a letter, in the letter the person asked for books they wished to receive, this was a typical request of thrillers, but also included an additional request. After asking for the books they wished to read this person also said, “I heard you send books to children. Would you be able to send some books to my kids” and continued by naming the types of books their children liked. I knew we offered this service, as it was on our receipt, but I had never seen or personally sent a package to children. I asked Elm what to do. He told me a story, “we used to send to children, but one time we got a letter back saying the guardian no longer wanted that person in the lives of their children and they appreciated the books, but not to send more on behalf of that person. Since then we stopped sending books to kids, but we should bring it back since it is something we say we offer.” I finished the letter, wrote the address down on a separate paper and taped it to the package. I put the original letter in an envelope labeled “Request for books to children”.

For a few months nothing was done about it, until Mulberry and Leaf brought up that they wanted to start the service back up. They had both seen letters requesting this service and

wanted to develop a process to at least try to send books. They made a proposal of the process and during a core meeting in early December we discussed it. I decided to be the note taker for the meeting. Mulberry and Leaf presented their proposal, originally it contained "Adding 'please provide contact info of child's current guardian' so we can contact guardians before sending. Also making a list of people who are using the kids book service to harass people so we can ignore their future requests. If not that, removing the kids book section from the receipt entirely." They explained how they want to start the process up again and Leaf said "we either need to figure out a process we can work with or we should take it off the receipt." Mulberry added, "we could make a list to make sure that we are not sending to people who do not want them." Elm mentioned another City based organization that works with families of people currently incarcerated and, "we could reach out to them and maybe they could take it on if we don't want to do it?" The draft ended up making it to consensus in which all eight people on the meeting consented to. The proposal passed quickly with only around fifteen minutes of discussion.

The decision on sending books to children is emblematic of the current process, decisions on internal operations move through a discussion of why what is being proposed is being proposed, the reasons for making a change or adopting a policy and then a redrafting of the proposal together. Another example of a decision being made occurred in the same meeting. This time we discussed changing the open-hours during the week to start an hour later.

Elm proposed this idea, "So I have been opening up during the week and usually it's just me there and I'm wondering if we can shift our hours a little later." Oak agreed adding, "You do a lot and it's total fair for us to shift the schedule to make it easier for you." Everyone supported adding this change, and Oak added, "we should make a social media post and change our time on

the website, so people don't show up." Mulberry added that "some people may not be checking social media or the website, so maybe we should start advertising the new time now and then in a few weeks move to the new time?"

This ended up becoming a proposal edited by Elm and Maple stating the change in time, showing up at the original time for three weeks will advertising the change, and making sure to communicate who would be opening in the future. When consensus was asked all seven people in the meeting voted in agreement and the proposal was sent to the chat so those who could not attend would have a chance to alter, block, or otherwise ask questions. After a few days with no further conversation the policy was enacted. In this is a similar process to what occurred in the decision to send books to children, the initial idea had general agreement, and then went to the pragmatics of introducing this change.

Both of these examples regard labor practices, that is what people do, and when they do it. Since the collective runs on volunteer labor, discussions on labor practices focus on the capacities of doing such labor. This is clear in the example of changing the opening time as Elm was negotiating his labor within the collective, and in the children's books program Mulberry and Leaf negotiate the labor they want to see and do. In this then is the understanding that consensus decision-making relies on individual labor capacities. Hence, the obligation is on the individual to negotiate how their labor is performed at Books. Labor practices are not the only decisions that are made, while they do account for a considerable amount of the decisions, there are also decisions around collective care and how to maintain structures of care as individuals in a collective.

In early April there was a core meeting, again over the phone, to discuss event updates, a suggestion on COVID caution, and the on-going process of finishing the consensus proposal. By the time the other, more immediate, tasks were finished everyone was too tired to continue discussing the consensus process. Specifically in this meeting, I focus on the drafting of a proposal for a "more COVID safe space". Mulberry brought up this point saying "there was a note left in the suggestion books asking how Books could be a more COVID safe space. We already mask, although it's not required, we could have N95s, clean surfaces more often, change the air, use the air purifier more often, and think about eating in the space."

Elm: "We do eat in the main room and could be better about that."

Lilac: "Currently we don't have a require masking policy and I don't think we should be telling people what to do, but we should encourage people who are sick not to come, and if people were recently sick to mask. Also changing the air and using the air purifier doesn't require asking others to do anything."

Elm: "The purifier is behind the arcade and yea maybe we should have a conversation on what are masking policy should be."

Maple: "Remember when we moved we got that purifier because someone donated it. It is a nice purifier and we should use it while we are there. And be conscious of changing the filter, our room is still dusty."

Elm: "Maybe we should talk about and then post in the space our masking policies. Make it explicit that people should not come if they are sick. It's a good idea to have it written out."

Oak: "We could make it a requirement if big crowds are coming to mask. When we have student groups we get a lot of people in the space, so we could also require masking when groups come."

Ash: “I agree and we should make sure that masks are prominently placed and easy to find.”

Maple: “Yea and put a sign up so people can find them easier.”

Oak: “Are we making masking required?”

Lilac: “I personally think it’s reasonable not to require masking. The hight of the pandemic was a few years.”

Mulberry: “I started a proposal on making the space more COVID cautious and I will send to the chat and here. We can edit anything.”

The conversation then got in to the specifics of what was capacity. Originally Oak suggested thirty, I had been taking notes for the meeting, but suggested twenty since the space gets cramped by that point. In the end the proposal included that all events would require masking, but open-hours would be encouraged—originally it said strongly encouraged, but Oak thought people would read that as a requirement, so Maple offered saying only encouraged—added turning on the air purifier to opening tasks, placing masks prominently with a sign, and adding a COVID specific suggestion box. After the drafting was done nine people gave their consent and the proposal was sent to the core chat.

This decision shows a focus on care, answering the question of what practices the collective can take on that are mindful of at risk volunteers or event attendees. While Lilac pushed back on making masking required at all times, the collective decided to implement policies that would change how participants engage the space in consideration with COVID and health. The move to implement these changes is one of collective care, but also a negotiation of how individuals are meant to engage the space and project. For example, masking being required once a certain capacity is reached is understood as practice of care by the individuals during

volunteering or an event. Moreover, Lilac's pushing back on making masking being always required is an example of the necessary component of consent in consensus—while I personally understand masking in a different perception of autonomy, that is besides the point. In the collective's decision then Lilac's pushing back requires that the other participants consider and negotiate her perspective. For this decision, and decisions in general, it is necessary for the collective to respect someone's individual perspective to determine a collective understanding. This again demonstrates how consensus works with the obligation that individuals act, as to facilitate a decision everyone can live with, even if there is not enthusiastic agreement. In this I turn to a final example of decision-making using consensus, one that had less initial unanimous agreement.

During early February the core group met to discuss various topics from dealing with non midwest letters, who was on the official paperwork, and the consensus process. As the consensus process had yet to be finalized we began to discuss the proposal and draft amendments to it. During the conversation Oak brought up how we would handle adding new members to the core group. Speaking about one person in specific,

"Petal has been asking me about doing things and they have been coming consistently for a while. I know in the past we just send a message about adding someone and then after a few days if no one says anything we add them, but should we make a clear process, so that it is clear to people who want to join the core group?"

Elm continued by discussing what he saw core membership constituting, "Yea and what it means to be a core member, right now that is access to the chat, the drive, and a key for the space, but what about things like email or other accounts? The stuff on the vouch form."

Maple reminded us, “We are figuring that out. I am creating the vouch form, maybe we should stay on this specifically.”

Cherry brought up how historically, “In the past we did do three months or so of consistently being at Books, but is that enough time for everyone to get to know someone, or should we focus on if other core members know who they are.”

Mulberry stressed this point, “Everyone takes there own time and maybe isn’t the most social, so a specific time line maybe doesn’t make the most sense, but I think it is important that core members get the change to meet whoever is being added.”

Oak mentioned “that’s a good point and maybe we should do both, it still makes sense to have a minimum time commitment like three months.”

Lilac agreed and offered adding two others, “Petal and Bloom have been coming consistently for like three months and I feel like everyone knows them pretty well.”

Ash took this in a different direction, “Yea Petal and Bloom are really young and they should have a life outside of doing this. Especially as they are in college they should take advantage of that.”

At this point I said, “I joined when I was twenty and I think both Petal and Blossom want to do more and if they want to join I think they should be able to. I agree though with Maple that Twig may have said something naive, but because they don’t come as often we don’t know what they think exactly.”

Ash responded, “I’m okay with adding Petal and Blossom, they both get along well with everyone here, I just think they should know that they don’t have to or that they have to do more than they can.”

While this conversation was going on Oak, Elm, Cherry, and Ash put the content into a proposal editing as we spoke, until we reached this point and the proposal was presented to vote on. The eight of us on the meeting consented to the proposal and it was sent to the chat to field questions by anyone else. In the end both Petal and Bloom were added as core members.

The decision-making on creating a formal on-boarding process took form because there were potential new core members. Thus there was an impetus for this to occur in a timely manner, differentiating it from the consensus and guidelines processes. The negotiation in this decision is not only who should be a part of the core group, but mainly how someone can join. The major point in the conversation that the core members should have the chance to get to know potential new core members is one about social cohesion. It is evident in this conversation that if a core member meets a potential new member and they do not get along, they could block their proposal from going through.

Briefly, on this point it does happen that a core member proposal is not consented to. In an example during this meeting there was a third proposed core member who was not consented to for multiple reasons, not being frequent, not having many relationships with other core members, and for having unclear political stances that conflicted with the expectations of the rest of the collective. Regardless of the reason, core membership is primarily constituted on bottom-lining and for those consistent volunteers to perform more labors. There is, certainly, always the possibility—and in some ways true—that the selectivity of core membership engenders a hierarchy that limits the collective's potential and actualization of mutual aid. These are patterns and practices to be cognizant of and require an additional focus on the ways in which the collective can avoid them, formal or informal alike.

It is important also to recognize that this decision is immediately a pragmatic negotiation, the process was made to on board two new core members. In this there was a grounded use in deciding on how to formalize this process. This is a useful note as within the anarchist-abolitionist decision-making of Books—certainly as in the case with other projects, not necessarily anarchist-abolitionist—the decision emerged out of the context of doing rather than a hypothetical situation. The point is, it is important to recognize that any decision is emerging from various contexts meaning they are discursive and iterative of things happening outside of the meeting itself. This brings me to the final point in this section, what makes it possible for consensus and anarchist autonomy to occur and be maintained at Books.

"The Culture is good, right now" Social Relations that Facilitate Consensus and Autonomy

More difficult decisions, such as a recent vouching process for access to the email and social media accounts, may take longer to ensure the process are clarified to the members, but even then the actual consensus occurs without many hiccups, in fact, at this point, through the entire time of using this process there has not been a proposal which was blocked. This elicits a further investigation into how the decision-making process can not only work to make decisions, but how it has worked with minimal limitations.

As has been remarked many times many of my interlocutors hold the opinion that, "if someone wants to do something they should be able to do it." Rather then negotiate further how consensus and autonomy can be constitutive, it is more important to disentangle how these two

ideologies of decision-making exist, together. I think Lilac described it best, “the culture is good, right now.” This opens up the underlying social fabric to the decision-making I have sketched out thus far, what is this culture and what does describing it as “good” mean? I find that this emerges largely outside of the formal core decision-making of meetings and attempts at consensus, in the open-hours of volunteering, in collective hangouts, and at events.

The intimate relations we have with one another, spending nearly two entire days together every week, facilitates a culture in which we rely on each other, have time to joke, play, and chat. As much as consensus and autonomy can be about creating structures and protocols it can only exist within these relationships, relationships which are made through doing things and spending time together. Graeber (2009:93) might refer to this as the principle that “one must never question the honesty or good intentions of another activist”, except Books gets at the how these good intentions and honesty are (re)created and maintained.

Open-hours, provides a space of sharing and coming together. Participants share food from home or grab pizza during a long day. A primary example of this was Oak inviting people over to help make vegan tamales the night before open hours. Oak and three others spent the evening and late in the night making food and when I asked they all said they had a good time even though it went until almost two in the morning. During open-hours music plays from a central computer, anyone can get up and put whatever they want. Countless hours have been spent discussing punk, hardcore, folk punk, international music, electronic, and much more. Community members share their interests allowing mutual appreciation and building rapport. Another example of this, which seems evident, is literature. Oak, Ash, and Lilac have all shared their interest and reading of Ursula K. Le Guin. For many core members sci-fi, specifically that

of Le Guin, opens the realm of possibilities giving an escape into the worlds that could be if it was not for this one. Oak regularly asks me if my father has started a newsletter, since I brought up my father's fascination with the extraterrestrial, or if he has any media recommendations.

Over the summer and fall we had social events, a beach day and a barbecue day in specific. A space outside of our regular space and labors together to meet, relax, talk, and play. I recall vividly the ride to the beach with Maple, Cherry, and Elm where we discussed new movies, the city, and the lake. The intimate feeling of care for friends was apparent, we did not only work together on this project, but cared about each others interests.

Building rapport, community, and culture are decisions in themselves. The questions of what we share, who we share with, and why/how we share are all decisions. These are the decisions which I see in Books that make it possible to say "the culture is good", or the good intentions/honesty of others. While it could be said this rests in the imagination of a world, one without prisons, states, or capital, it comes about through the simple interactions, the day-to-day decisions, and the relying on one another to make this project happen.

Through this close and consistent engagement with one another the culture of Books is built out of these relationships. This exemplifies why the decision on adding core members also required every core member having the chance to meet new prospective members because these relationships make it possible to work together, to have good intentions, and to care. Certainly this is not unique to Books, but what I describe is specific to Books. To focus on the anarchist-abolitionist aspect, this rapport also comes through in reading letters together. As I describe in the third section at length, we receive not only letters for requests, but art, poetry, essays, gratitude, and reflections. During open-hours when one of these letters is opened it is shared

around to volunteers to look at and discuss. The collective appreciation of these pieces also contributes an important dimension to this culture, that someone not only took the time to make something and send it to us, but that they did so in prison with the limited resources they have. These moments then too, make it possible for volunteers to orient towards a culture of anarchist-abolition.

In the next section I take a deeper look at how autonomy plays out at Books. I specifically look at how autonomy is understood as a collective obligation, that is while consensus relies on individuals' participation, autonomous projects are necessary for the collective. In this way, I am troubling the standard conception that autonomy is only an individual practice, because pragmatically while individuals enact autonomy they do so in relation to the collective. This does similar work to how consensus described here troubles the idea that it is devoid of the individual and rather focuses on how the individual makes consensus possible.

Autonomous Decisions, the Obligation of the Collective

An Introduction to Autonomous Projects at Books

One of the first projects I was involved in was creating a zine archive and library. Early on in my time spent at Books Elm and I discussed the popular requests we received in the mail, the zines regularly printed, and the various zines on display racks, in boxes, or simply on the table in front of the racks. Elm showed me a hidden page on the Books website, the page had a collection of legal materials on both federal and state levels. He talked about the amount of zines that we had, the rare ones, the ones not online anywhere, ones accumulated from two decades of Books existence and over two decades of the Refuge being an activist space. Hibiscus, my friend I originally began go to books with, and I began sorting boxes of zines. We sorted by theme, arbitrary at first. The categories we made included: D.I.Y/How-To, Communique/Report-Back, Black Anarchism & the Black Radical Tradition, Anarchist Theory, Abolition, and Decolonization. One summer night everyone else had already gone, Hibiscus and I sat at a table in front of the stage at the Refuge, the only other people there were Elm and Maple. I asked about the history of the Refuge, Elm explained it was on old building surviving a large fire, in the end of the 20th century, the Refuge became a housing space for queer youth fleeing their families and since then various political projects began to spring up. One that Elm mentioned was a campaign to create a new bus route. Maple noted that the binder containing their meeting notes, proposals, and plans still existed in a cabinet on the first floor. Maple retrieved it, then Hibiscus and I started flipping through it asking about the campaign, but what took our

fascination were the flyers. All sorts of flyers for many activist events of the mid 2010s sprinkled the binder the Saint Patrick's Day Rat Pack call to action flyer popped out to us. Maple told us how so many people came to the Refuge and brought in many diverse projects. After that night Hibiscus and I, admittedly, did little work maintaining the archive and a few months later we left the Refuge. Now after a move to a new space, only ten minutes west by car of the Refuge which feels much further—Maple, Elm, Oak, and Ash all noted how infrequently they had been by the Refuge since—, the cabinet housing the archive was empty.

After we settled in to our new space, a space we paid rent for the first time in any core volunteer's recollection, Elm brought back up the idea of the archive. For a month Elm, a friend of mine, and I resorted zines creating new labels and categories on a spreadsheet. The three of us for this month were typically the last three people at Books except for when Cherry or Maple would stay late. While we worked we chatted about music, video games, and technology. After we sorted the boxes of zines and properly labelled them, Elm began scanning and cross checking zines for their availability online, a process he did much on his own. Finally, Elm was able to convert the spreadsheet into a pamphlet containing titles of all the zines we had.

This pamphlet became increasingly useful as it contained our most commonly requested zines. Elm was able to mass send these pamphlets and within a month we began receiving requests for specific titles in our collection. During the work to put this pamphlet together we discussed the categories we would use, one of the most important to both me and Elm was putting front and center the content created by incarcerated authors. At Books we receive many letters containing people's art work, poetry, essays, and inside reporting. Historically, Books would ask these creators for their permission to reproduce this content in a community

production, such as in a zine, which would be mass sent to everyone we had sent to before. The work of incarcerated authors is important to Books' volunteer community and to the community of people we receive letters from.

As discussed in the previous section, autonomy is of critical importance at Books. Autonomy, using the definition provided by Weldon (2023), is the practice of doing what one desires conscious of their involvement in a broader network of connections. The extended scene I open with is an example of one of these autonomous projects, neither Hibiscus, Elm, nor I asked for permission, even though at this point only Elm was a core member. This catalog has since been sent to hundreds of people in prison and we receive letters back ask for content directly from the catalog. As my first participation in this collectives use of autonomy I consider this to be an emblematic example of autonomous projects at Books. This project provides a tool or resource for the collective that assists with the labor of completing packages, while also representing an action that, we thought, no one would be against. This pulls in the discussion of the previous section of "the culture [being] good." This was not some hidden project, Maple, Cherry, Oak, and Ash were often there when we worked on this catalog and knew about us doing it. Moreover, this project was discussed in the core chat, as something we were working on as a small group. Though someone withholding consent is not clear if not directly asked, in this case no one voiced any qualms during or since about this project.

This introduction also serves to describe the practices of an autonomous project, with decisions that emerged from open-hours and, primarily, by in person discussion. This serves as one example of an autonomous project among me, Elm, Hibiscus, and my friend represented a small working group that worked to put together the zine library. While originally Hibiscus and I

discussed the ideas of how to organize the zines physically, after the move Elm and discussed new categories and ways to organize the zines online. We referenced previous zine archives and how they organized zines and built from those categories. This practice was emergent and largely unplanned. Not all autonomous projects take this same trajectory, and I turn to briefly describe other projects I have been a part of in some capacity and how these processes are engaged with in core group discussions.

A Look at Autonomous Group Projects

Another autonomous project was the organizing around Prison Banned Books Week. During October every year, there is a week dedicated to raising awareness on how "Prisons are the largest censors in the United States" (Prison Banned Books Week). During this week projects such as Books partner with local indie bookstores to raise books and money, through a money matching grant program. The idea is that customers at these bookstores can buy a book for Books, paying the bookstore. The book will be set aside with the receipt which will be presented to the grant foundation that will match the cost of all the sales as a grant to Books. During late September we began planning in a small breakout group from the main core group. The main organizers at Books were Ash and Maple, with support from Oak, Mulberry, Elm, and myself. Ash sent a message asking in the core chat who would be able to support the initiative and a new chat was made for everyone who said they would be able to help.

Most of the decision-making and process occurred in the chat, but we had a meeting to begin the initial planning. When we met on the phone I sat outside the University's library on a bench under the trees, Ash was the impromptu facilitator as they were spearheading the project

with Maple. The five of us on the call, Ash, Maple, Oak, Mulberry, and me, discussed which bookstores we would partner with. All the bookstores in the past had been on the South and Southwest side and Oak brought up expanding partnerships to the North side. Both Mulberry and I live on the Northside and said we would look at local bookstores to partner with. I knew of two that could work, one being a comic book store. This excited Oak and Maple and they pushed for the comic book store. Comics and manga are often requested from people in prison, and because of that our selection of them is always meager.

To add a brief anecdote, Oak and Lilac have recently been in conversation with a comic book and manga seller and have been able to get more of them. Even then we have gotten about fifty manga per shipment, but of the fifty they have been made up of the same two or three manga, which means when people request again for manga asking for either the next in the series or a different manga we do not have them to provide. This has no doubt been an immense benefit, but the struggle to find free and ample amounts of manga/comics remains.

When the list of bookstores was read out people in the call claimed the ones near them or were willing to do. This served as a first-come-first-served mode of decision-making and when someone said they lived closer to a bookstore the original claimer relinquished. By the end of the discussion the plan was for each person to email, call, or contact in some way with their bookstores. The rest of the updates and discussion on how to proceed once a bookstore agreed occurred in the chat or on our shared drive. Immediately afterward I emailed the two bookstores I suggested from the North side asking if they were interested in partnering.

Over the course of the next few days I called and then went in person to both of the stores as there was no email back. When I went in person to the comic book store they said they were

under new management and would be unlikely to participate with the changes happening internally. This was an unfortunate end for that bookstore. Slightly less worse, the bookstore partnered with a different organization for the week and told me we could try again in the future, but it was unlikely since they already had this pre-existing partnership.

After the two stores said they were unable to participate I offered to help with whoever needed support. I ended up calling two bookstores for Oak as they were busy with work. One was a comic book store and they agreed to the partnership, the other told me they would get back to me which they did not and ended up not partnering. In the end we had five bookstores, Ash and Mulberry bottom-lined for communication, distribution of materials, and picking up the books, for two stores each, Oak bottom-lined the comic bookstore.

During this process in both open-hours and their free time Ash and Mulberry created a graphic to distribute to the bookstores highlighting Prison Banned Books Week and the most common genres of requests. This included books on themes of or by, "Anti-Colonial, Black/ Brown/Indigenous Authors, Books in Spanish, LGBTQ+ Fiction, Fantasy/Sci-fi, Thriller/ Mystery, Comics/Manga, Art/Drawing, Puzzle/Games, Trades/D.I.Y/How-to, Business/Finance/ Investments/Econ, GED Test Prep, Computers, (Soft-cover) Dictionaries, Law".

The last step was to calculate the total amount of money customers used to purchase the books. This was so that the grant foundation would match that (up to one thousand dollars per store) and donate to Books. Ash made a spreadsheet to input the totals that the rest were able to get from talking to the bookstore and seeing receipts. A project such as this requires the impetus of participants. The books and money acquired from this week are crucial to Books, it is what allows the organization to continue to send books to people in prison. The money is used to pay

for postage on packages, pay for printing/shipping materials, and to pay the rent. Without these autonomous projects Books could not continue to exist and the people who rely on Books for literature in prison would be devoid of these resources.

A Look at Events and Tabling

A reoccurring autonomous action is tabling at events or shows. The event could be an autonomous project of its own such as the punk/hardcore show Lilac and Oak organized or the event could be organized by a separate collective, organization, or person. I will explore two different events I tabled at with Books, the lead up to the tabling, how decisions were made to table, and the tabling itself.

On a cold December morning I got up at 5:30 a.m. rolled out of bed and took the train across the City to the South side. I was picked up by Maple at around 7:30 a.m. and as we drove to pick up Elm we discussed how things were going. I mentioned I still needed to finish writing essays for my finals and she mentioned staying up late the previous night writing legal memos. She said it felt similar to writing essays for school. We also discussed the bar exam she was studying for and the irony that lawyers write for a while and not in one eight hour sitting.

When we picked up Elm we began the drive to a zine festival happening in Southern Indiana. I napped for most of the drive as I slept little the night before. A few days prior Elm had messaged me about the event, that some friends invited Books to come table, and asked if I wanted to join. We had tabled at an event at University town the spring before and had a good time, so I said I was in. The day before we left Elm told me that he and Maple were planning on leaving around seven in the morning to arrive at the event on time. When I woke up we had

made it to the town and were looking for the building we were going to table at. As we drove a swarm of crows flew overhead. When we finally got to the building we unloaded our boxes of zines and walked into the building. The building was a school which a local participant described as a “hippie school”. We setup in the gym with the rest of the tablers in the far corner to the right of the entrance.

The tables were set up in a U-shape on the edge of the gym, leaving the stage unobstructed. There was an internal U-shape of tables, facing the same direction, leaving about a five-foot walkway for people to look at the tables. When we got to the table we set up our zines across the table. The night before Elm had stayed late at Books printing the zines for the day. The zines we brought were on PIC Abolition, Prison Support, Anarchism, Anti-ICE efforts, Palestine, and New Afrika. We also set up a stand for a community member whose book we were selling, the community member was in prison at the time and had written most of the book in prison, all of the money from the book sales would go directly to them. There was only enough room for two of us behind the table, so we took turns at the table and walking around to the other tables.

Most of the tables were Anarchist or Queer focused. Three of the tables focused on prison support, the main organizers had a table with cards to be sent to PP/POW that attendees were invited to write a message and in exchange given a raffle ticket. Many of the tablers made their own zines such as a collection of speculative fiction, tips/introduction to asexuality, and memoir comics. There was even an artist who drew famous civil rights graphic novels.

At the table, I introduced Books when people came by, that we were a mutual aid group sending books to people in prison across the midwest and U.S. at large, and that we were from the City. I would go on to tell people the zines and stickers were free, but that we were selling the

book on behalf of our community member and I went on to explaining who the author was and that the book was about their experiences through self-reflection and coming to anarchism. In the end I was able to sell two of the books. As the day concluded Elm and I submitted our raffle tickets to try to get some prizes. I ended up winning three pieces of pottery, I gave them to my family as holiday gifts.

The decision to be involved in this tabling event was spontaneous. Elm had shown me the flyer for the event about a month earlier and said he and Maple were probably going to go. When Elm invited me, I thought it sounded exciting to be involved in a tabling outside of the City or a community I was familiar with. The tabling felt identical to when we tabled at events at universities or during zine shares, but distinct from shows where the community is usually familiar in some capacity with Books.

The group who invited us was involved in a similar project of supporting people in prison and was therefore a way to connect and learn how this group was able to operate. The group showed us their book binding set up which lead to Elm getting a cheap bookbinder, so that we could make better quality and larger zines. This therefore pragmatically affected Books as since then the binder has become an important part of open-hours. Moreover, selling copies of our community members book is important to members of the collective, specifically Elm, Maple, and Cherry who know this person well. While other members may not have this close bond, selling there book is a typical aspect of any tabling event, and members have read and discussed the book, as well as other writings by this person, during open-hours. Therefore even in a location detached from our space, this autonomous event reflects ties to the collective that autonomy rests in.

Linguistic Analysis of an Autonomous Project

I now turn to a linguistic analysis of one such autonomous project. In late January 2025, I recorded a conversation between myself and two others during the open-hours of a volunteer run books to people in prison program. The two others were Lilac and Oak who both frequent the punk/hardcore scene. The collective operates primarily on three levels, during open-hours, in online chats, and through core member meetings. This conversation exemplifies a specific mode of decision-making within the collective. While some decisions are made by consensus in core meetings, others emerge and are put together through individual or small group impetus, in this conversation, these decisions were described as "pet projects" by Lilac (Transcript 1.2 line 13).

We sat in the corner of the space I call the "comfy corner". This was separated from the rest of the space by short three foot bookshelves making a square with the corner, in one corner there was a table with snacks for volunteers, three sofa chairs, and in the adjacent corner an altar dedicated to victims of (pol)ice violence. I asked these two core members—who participate in the internal operations of the collective—to assist me in planning an event to raise money to purchase a book written by a graduate of a university's prison education program, who died in prison shortly after releasing their book. I specifically asked Lilac and Oak because of their recent work organizing a benefit show for the collective. I argue that through lexical linkages, phoneme adding, prosody, narrative, chronotope, and turn-constructional units (TCUs) Oak, Lilac, and I leverage collective obligations and knowledge to not only plan an event, but reflect on how events should be planned. First, I look at the construing of "event" as "show" through lexical categorization as it emerged in the conversation. Second, I introduce the chronotope of

the punk show in its relationship to fundraising events for the collective. Furthermore during this point there is a narrative referring to a previous conversation that centers autonomy in the decision-making process and construes it as a moral obligation. Third, I look at the TCUs of a specific interaction that sought to expand "event" from "show", but due to the socially constructed chronotope of the punk show resulted in returning to this lexical construction before needing to be questioned again. Finally, I focus on the use of specific phoneme use/disuse in contractions and vowel stressing on the effect they have on prosody which questions the assumptions in regard to labor of putting on an event. I conclude by connecting these linguistic features to the world building of this anarchist project, that is how the practices of decision-making within this conversation facilitating individual autonomy within a formal consensus decision-making structure.

Weldon (2023), looks at a squatter community in Prague dubbed "Klinika" centering on autonomy as a world building practice. Chapter two "The Autonomous Use & Organization of Space" meditates on autonomy within the collective, how it transforms space, but significant for this analysis how autonomy operates beyond a "anyone can do anything?" reading. I am again motivated by Weldon's separation of libertarian autonomy and anarchist autonomy. Weldon defines anarchist autonomy as, "… based on individual autonomous action as a conscientious part of a collective whole and actively factors in the needs and outcomes of that whole within one's individual decisions" (128). Weldon centers their argument, in a large part, on "Eastern philosophy" in contrast to "Western philosophy" to center the interconnected and egalitarianism described in their definition of anarchist autonomy. I move with this definition when specifically referring to autonomy, especially as an ethical obligation.

For the analysis I look to Van Valin (2001) and their discussion in chapter three "Dependency relations". This is particularly useful to understand the syntax of speakers and how lexical categories become construed. In particular bilateral dependencies where, " the occurrence of each element is dependent upon the occurrence of the other; that is, the head cannot occur without the dependent, and the dependent cannot occur without the head" (89). This is significant for my study as it underscores how lexical categories become construed through the use of bilateral dependancy.

I also am informed in my analysis by Schegloff (1996 [2010]). In their chapter, "Turn organization: one intersection of grammar and interaction" Shegloff analyzes Turn-Constructional Units (TCUs) as linguistic categories of analysis. TCUs provide an explicit look at interaction and grammar through how turns are created and taken up—or purposefully not. This is useful in determining how participants in conversation construe signs into stable and agreed upon social facts. In particular TCUs have specific resonance with poetic aspects of speech which can explain how these aspects affect discourse, in particular I am thinking about how missing a rhythmic beat allows for another interlocutor to pick up a turn and encoding meaning on to what was being said.

When we began, I positioned the possible event as a show, specifically by saying "what ideas you would have for that like if we want to do a show or something" (1.1 Lines 3-4). "That" is a deictic for "event" on line 2. The terms "event" and "show" become construed and further lexically linked as the discourse went on. On line 10 Oak says "If it's a show" this further links "it" again referring to "event" with "show" as a lexical category through the syntax as there is a bilateral dependency between "it" "is" and "is" "show" (Van Valin 2001, 89). Then line 12

continues this construal as Oak discusses time constraints by referring to “bands” which is denotationally linked to “show” as musical performance. This construal continued on lines 22-26. On line 22 “like” is used as a preposition in “we seen it like…planning our show”, linking the effort of planning the new event/show syntactically with the planning of the up coming show. Then on line 26 Lilac refers to “event” referring to its co-textual meaning of show/musical performance.

The notion of “people [having] their pet projects” by Lilac on line 13 of transcript 1.2 is significant in the decision-making of this event and the collectives decision-making process across speech events. For this analysis I look at how the autonomy described by these “pet projects” are taken up in discourse. The question and discourse around autonomy is normative and reoccurring, that is it is understood that people should be able to and should have their own projects as part of the collective. The normative understanding is taken up by Oak on line 24 by saying “one hundred percent” twice in a row.

How this emerges in the conversation is significant, on line 1 Oak offers advice to plan the date of the event over a month away. At first Lilac pushes for a month after that, before agreeing with Oak that one month is possible (Lines 3-7). The negotiation at this moment is for a collective understanding of the chronotope, that of one to two months out and, at this point still understood to be, a musical show. Both Oak and Lilac are informed by their planning of their up coming show and thus situate the possibility of the event in that chronotope, a punk show. This changes with Lilac’s discussion of “pet projects”. Although not taken up to decide the time of the event, the conversation moved to the space on line 27, the understanding that someone has to “spearhead” and “do the work” (lines 16 & 19) contributes to the autonomy in planning this,

specifically mine, that there is no fixed time scheme and is facilitated by, primarily my, autonomy and labor.

The notion that the statement on autonomy is normative, means it is also a social fact of the collective. This comes through in the uptake it has, both Oak and I agree enthusiastically—recall the "one hundred percent" utterance and my "yea"s of lines 15 and 26. This has use in the political economy, connecting to the ideological pretense of an anarchist space. The specific understanding of "pet projects" within this speech event, and the collective's context, clashes with the notion of authorization. Lilac's reference to another speech event with Elm, a middle aged white man who grew up in the South suburbs of the City and who is formerly incarcerated, construes this understanding of autonomy to more people than in the conversation. In doing so Oak and I pick up that this autonomy is understood by Elm as well. Moreover, reference to Elm conjures the social personae of someone committed to anti-authoritarianism and that because this idea is morally judged as "obviously… good" (line 21) authorization would undermine this ethical obligation members of the collective have to one another.

As referenced earlier in the beginning of the conversation "event" became lexically linked to "show" as in a musical performance. In transcript 1.3 I wish to focus on the Turn-Constructional Units (TCUs) that is what are these units and how, "… these units can constitute possibly complete turns; on their possible completion, transition to a next speaker becomes relevant (although not necessarily accomplished)" (Schegloff 1996: 55). First, looking at the interaction of Oak and Lilac between lines 18 and 22 Oak completes his turn after finishing a personal anecdote on flyering. Oak's "… and people show up" on line 19 concludes his verb phrase and thus the anecdote. Lilac, taking up this offered TCU, transitions the conversation to a

question on line 20 through “what are different ways…”. Lilac then on line 22 says, “but what are like other” which does not end with the expected noun to complete the noun phrase, but Oak and I both follow this up by saying “That’s a good point” on line 24 and 25. Lilac does not complete the phrase, but through the prosody of Lilac’s speech the rhythm expected another beat to which Oak completes with “yea” on line 23. The “That’s a good point” utterances are completed rhythmically and grammatically allowing Lilac to continue on line 26 stating the impetus for the event “So you are trying to raise money specifically f:::” directed at me. The extended /f/ at the end of Lilac’s utterance, before the overlapping speech, allows me to pick up the /f/ with “for the book” on line 27. The conversation then continued on how to acquire copies of the book, discussing should people bring a copy directly or pay an entrance fee.

The conversation followed largely on the connection between “show” and “event” even after Lilac’s question on line 22. The chronotope of a punk show is referenced on line 31 with “entrance ticket” and line 51 with “what if they’re like oh shit I I found out about this tonight?”. The event is construed to having an “entrance ticket” and taking place at night. The context referenced has direct similarities to the local punk scene, shows have people working the doors to collect entrance fees and in most cases take place at night. Specifically, the event both Lilac and Oak planned require people working the door stamping people with their “entrance ticket” and the show beginning at seven in the evening. This continued to link our discussion of event in the chronotope of a show. The former in conjunction with Lilac’s, ‘I think that a show is a great way to get people in the door and raise money” on line 60 making explicit that we were indeed still talking about a show. This proximity to the punk scene illuminates the macro connections between this collective and the surrounding political economy. The returning to the specific

chronotope of a punk show (additionally supported by the spaces discussed from lines 1-14 not mentioned prior) establish them as crucial potentials for fundraising. Moreover, the socially constructed norm for this collective's events are punk shows. This is especially salient as throughout my time in the collective, punk shows contribute significantly to the budget and operations of the collective, but do not provide the main source of money to keep the project afloat. The main source of money, for at least the past two years, has come from grants. Punk shows do provide other significant resources, often shows allow the collective to have a table. At this table are free informational zines on prison solidarity, a set up for letter writing to political prisoners/prisoners of war, birthday cards for incarcerated people, a donation box/Q.R code, and information to volunteer. This last aspect becomes highlighted in open hours following a show. The Saturday following a show we had an unexpected 30 volunteers, many of whom came because of said show. Shows contribute to the wider network of volunteers who come and provide the crucial labor to ensure book requests are filled in a timely manner. The fundraising discussed in this event is unique, as it specifically exists to raise money for a specific book—not to support the operations of the collective—and engages the university's undergraduate community, who are 30 minutes to an hour away from the collective. Thus unlikely to mobilize large numbers.

As the conversation went on two main possibilities for the event arose. As described in the previous transcripts the show was still an option, but now there was the option of a bookstore/cafe talk introduced in lines 73-80 of transcript 1.3. Over the course of the fourth transcript my interlocutors and myself positioned the two possibilities in distinct roles and what each option could entail. During this section I look first at the positioning of the "bookstore/cafe

event" versus the "show". Second, I look at the stressing of syllables and increased phonemes in speech as participants negotiate the labor required to put on the event.

From lines 2-6 of 1.4 Oak says "do we want to make this a very intimate like for people who really care about the cause or you were just trying to get as much money as possible I do love the bookstore idea I still fell like a show might bring more money". Using the preposition "or" the two possibilities are put into contention with one other based on their effect. Moreover, each option is positioned as doing different things; that being exclusively either "very intimate for people" or "trying to get as much money as possible". Thus the syntax of these lines positions the options as effectively doing contrasting things. Recalling that the purpose of the event is to raise money to buy copies of the book, Oak argues in favor of the show as a more effective means to that end. Then lines 9-13 Oak follows this by describing the supplementary forms of fundraising the show could have. By deploying these varying modes of monetary accruement Oak now aligns within a position of knowledge on the matter. Following this line Lilac references local punk bands on lines 15-17 aligning herself also in a position of knowledge on the discussion of potential musical performance shows. In doing so on lines 18-19, 21-22 Oak then moves to "bands" and establishes knowledge on the general lexical category Lilac aligned herself with in specificity.

This effect of temporary knowledge moves to my next linguistic variable with the add/ drop of phonemes specifically /It/ /I/z/ versus /Its/ and the stressing of vowels. On lines 52 and 57 Oak says "it is" instead of "it's" which he previously enunciated. Moreover, on these lines Oak stresses vowels in "a::" and "lo::t". Before this on line 36 Lilac stressed /i/ in "any" when referring to doing more fundraisers in the future regardless of this event. Lilac's stressing, as a

rare occurrences, indexes an obligation to fundraising and how events such as the one we are discussing will happen in the future. This obligation is taken up with Oak on line 43 when he responds with “Absolutely”. Then on line 50 Oak repositions back into the context of the event we are planning reminding Lilac and myself of the labor required to put the event on. The additional phonemes and stressing of vowels by Oak on lines 52 and 57 draw attention to the labor, positioning Oak as questioning the simplicity of doing both events. By modifying the phonemic content of the phrase “it is” with the additional stressing of the phonemes /e/ and /a/ in “a lot” as /It/Iz//e::/la::t/ modify the prosody of speech. The shift in prosody through phonemic content and vowel stressing are non normative as earlier uses of contractions such as “it’s” and “that’s” on lines 1 and 30 by Oak drop the second /I/. Furthermore, I introduce the idea of doing both possible events line 27 and Oak’s response on line 30 neither stresses the /e/ or /a/ in “a lot” nor adding the additional /I/ as mentioned in “that’s”. The non normative use of phonemes and vowel stressing focuses the possible difficult Oak is conveying on lines 52 and 57. Following this on line 68 Lilac concedes she could be “underestimating”. Hence, Oak’s utterance effectively questioned the perceived ease of putting on the bookstore event.

These transcripts provide insight into how decisions are planned while 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4 specifically highlights the knowledge and expertise in event planning my interlocutors have. Lilac and Oak’s expertise on event planning emerges through their negotiation of ideas presented in the discourse. By utilizing linguistic features we were able to collectively determine decisions and focusing on rhetoric positioned the event planning within the collectives ideals of autonomy and authorization. The construal of “event” with “show” throughout the conversation illuminates both Lilac and Oak’s individual connections to the punk scene and the connection the collective

has to the punk scene. There expertise in this regard becomes significant for how a decision should be made, specifically in line with the temporal, but also spatial and monetary. Their knowledge in this regard also demonstrates a positive rather than negative logic. Even in the case of planning out how far in advance the event should be, Lilac refers to the notion of "pet projects" and relinquishes an authoritative position on how the event need be planned. This also appears in the TCUs of transcript 1.3 as Lilac expands the notion of event describing event as a more open concept bringing in the idea of a bookstore event. The narrative in 1.3 about Elm and Lilac's conversation also expands the understanding of autonomy for "pet projects" to the level of the collective. Repetition of this and similar statements beyond this conversation by other collective members contributes to this construal. Oak's prosody change through phonemic content also acts to understand the effort of doing these "pet projects", not that is impossible, but that "it is a lot". Even a decision such as this moves from multiple valences of individual to collective, at times it was questions directly at me, then questions on what we—as the three of us —could do, and lastly what is important to the collective in making this decision on a "pet project".

I wish to turn to an example of a brief instance where someones autonomous project briefly clashed with someones consent. Lilac, as mentioned, is a regular participant of the punk and hardcore scene, after planning their show with Oak, Lilac voiced putting together a new show with bands who wanted to help fundraise for Books. Everyone was initially on board the bands were well known and well liked. The main point of tension was the date of the show, Lilac proposed a date in late September, unfortunately this clashed with an event that has been a yearly staple for many Books core members. After Maple brought up this issue, Lilac agreed to look for

other dates, but returned to pushing this specific date saying it worked best for the bands. Maple described feeling disrespected and that Lilac was not considering the relationship some volunteers have to this yearly event which most volunteers never attend, that is this autonomous project was seen to break the idea of autonomous actions being a collective good. Tensions have appeared to calm down and Lilac has negotiated a different day with the bands, but this points towards the important aspect of conflict resolution that Books does not have. While the culture can be good, as Lilac also said, it may not last. Guidelines and conflict resolution strategies are a significant factor in which participants in collectives can continue to move together through extended contact and differing perspectives. This is something many core members describe as important, in car rides with Mulberry this has been repeatedly brought up, in late nights at Books with Maple and Elm, and in conversations during open hours with Ash and Oak. Books not having updated these policies or devising strategies risks the continued facilitation of social cohesion. This is not to say that explicit guidelines must be a necessary condition for social cohesion, nor saying they are a sufficient condition, but rather this is a point members bring up and in the idea of longevity of the project is seen as necessary for this project.

Facilitating Autonomy at Books

The projects described throughout this section take different forms, from individual to small group projects and from inside to outside the space. All of these autonomous projects are important labors to the reproduction of the collective be it the catalog, tabling, fundraising, or events. These projects sustain the collective's ability to perform mutual aid as they aggregate

funds, books, or volunteers. It is in this understanding that individual autonomy takes on a collective obligation. As this section shows these autonomous projects are necessary.

The collectives connection to anarchism, with ethical prefiguration are demonstrated through these practices of autonomy. Books's experiments with autonomy and navigating these processes is an attempt to configure a space in how the participants imagine an anarchist-abolitionist world could exist. While there are tensions at times, the experimentation in configuring these autonomous projects within the collective demonstrates the rhizomic character described in the introduction. These projects have pragmatic effects that shape how practices of labor are performed at Books. The catalog is a clear example in reshaping aspects of labor, but so are the events that bring new members in and expands the labor potential necessary for Books to do mutual aid. Not all projects have the same effects, or are visible in the same register, the Prison Banned Books Week works as an example of this. These weeklong fundraisers and partnerships were not new with this project, and are necessary for Books to continue. In the form of monetary support and aggregation of literary material Prison Banned Books Week provides Books with the resources to pay rent, shipping, and printing materials. The books raised are tied directly to the requests of people in prison rather than any book the collective can get their hands on. This still serves as ethical prefiguration, as the project relies on a broader network of community to engage with mutual aid and support it. Books is only able to reproduce itself with the direct support of this community, in this is the understanding that mutual aid extends beyond the sited practice of packing and shipping occurring at the space.

Again, it is important to understand how these autonomous projects can exist and cause relatively little conflict. The understanding of the work and values of the project, emerging from

practices of anarchist-abolition, comes from the important social relationships cultivated and strengthened through prolonged engagement with one another. It is through this that not only autonomous decisions can happen, but because of these relationships that conflict can be resolved.

Letters Extending the Assemblage of Decisions-Making

Introducing the Assemblage and Looking at Letters

Letters and communication with people in prison are a significant factor within Books as it pertains both to the decision-making and labor of the collective. Recall the decision to restart the process of sending books to children. The exigence was because of multiple letters requesting this service. The communications with people in prison have a direct effect on the decisions which are made. Furthermore, the reason to do a fundraiser to buy the book written by a university prison education program graduate was because of letters requesting urban thrillers. Again, letters play a crucial role in making the decisions to find the material which keeps the project going. On this point as well, as a student at the university and being in that community, I felt drawn to support their work and provide it to the people who needed it the most. This section is heavily influenced by the work of Orisanmi Burton, Sylvia Wynter, and Katherine McKittrick in particular. In considering the ways in which letters effect the decision-making, labor, care, and social connections of Books, Burton's "Captivity, Kinship & Black Masculine Care Work Under Domestic Warfare", Wynter's work on the Plantation Archipelago, and McKittrick's "Plantation Futures" are significant theoretical impositions that give me the language to describe this mode of relationality.

It is significant to consider the ways in which people in prison contribute to shaping Books. Their participation should not be understated, communication with people in prison on one level allows for members of the collective to understand the needs of people in prison, but on

a second level with this communications enable a focus on the social assemblage that the anarchist-abolitionist lineage depends on. Through these communications and the decisions they influence, expands Books into being a wider practice of care beyond an automated process of sending books. The recognition of reading a letter and spending time, at times a whole hour, ensuring that the person who sent that letter can get the best content possible interrogates the process through which people are disconnected. While not perfect and certainly limited, this process invokes a greater experiment of how to build these bonds and networks. This is a crucial component I identify in the work of Books and anarchist-abolition, creating, maintaining, and negotiating social relationships with people in prison and people formerly incarcerated is both a prefigurative experiment, but also navigating "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Truth/Power/ Freedom" of Wynter which is meant to be separate realms of human experience.

The world of prison and of the outside are not only materially disconnected, but ideologically too. Take for example the state of Illinois, in mid August 2025 the IDOC passed emergency legislation to ban physical mail from entering prisons for 150 days (ILGA). The emergency act came a year after IDOC signed an agreement with a telecommunications company ICSolutions which is providing mail scanning capabilities for the IDOC prisons (WTTW). While this also means a private company is able to profit off of communications between people inside and outside of prison, this also means people in prison lose access to the physical mail that makes up a primary structure of care (Burton, 2021). The emergency legislation by IDOC severed the connection between people in prison and outside to materially benefit the PIC, and, extending Wynter, the ideological ascendancy of Man.

This has particular effects on Books, as the project relies on the input and evaluations of people within prison. As part of the praxis of Books being an anarchist-abolitionist collective, interactions with people in prison are paramount. I highlight a specific letter we received at Books one that centers the experience of people in prison and their relation to books as a need:

> *Thank you so much for the reading material you sent, but what really touched me was the included zine. It's nice to know and see that there is a community of people out there who care about us. It's hard to feel worthy of love when you're stuck in a place like this. I believe a lot of us don't deserve the treatment that we get here. While some of us, most of us, are not cold-hearted people. A lot of us have made bad mistakes and are just trying to learn from them. You guys give me the opportunity to learn, and for me, that is priceless in here.*

This letter is one among many sharing a similar sentiment, that people in prison are trying to heal, recalling Mulberry's words from the first section, and that books provide some of that. This letter also points towards the extended community of people in prison that Books participates in. The "zine" in the letter was created by a student group providing an introduction to Books which included a section of poetry at the end written by incarcerated poets. This also demonstrates Books rhizome character, the poetry of one person has profound impacts on others, in this way Books works a line of flight.

This letter also marks what people in prison need, this connection to people out of prison who care. The decision-making of Books considers this, even though the people making the final decisions are not in prison, they are informed by the hundreds of letters monthly. While I wrote my first grant proposal for Books Elm, Maple, and I calculated that Books serves over eight

hundred people monthly. The input of people in prison is not formalized within the decision-making process, but pragmatically affects the decisions made, directly as in book publishing projects, but also indirectly in the literary material core members prioritize, such as described in the Prison Banned Books Week initiative spearheaded by Ash.

Taking to the Road, Talking Letters

Over a three day period in early Spring, Maple, Elm, and I drove across the country to Pennsylvania to meet a community member being released from prison. In the weeks prior to our journey Elm messaged me asking if I wanted to come, and to assist in driving the twenty hours there and back. The timing fit perfectly in my break from classes, so I said I could help and I was excited to meet the community member. To get to Pennsylvania, before it was too late, Maple recommended we leave at nine in the morning. On the day of I took the red line across the city to where Maple and Elm picked me up. Over the course of our journey we chatted for hours in the car and over meals. In this portion, I argue that the geography of prisons is integral to the decision-making of Books through both our sited location in the City and the identity of (formerly) incarcerated. To do so I weave in decisions relying on the input of incarcerated people throughout the telling of the roadtrip, juxtaposing what happens at Books to the geography of the PIC.

Geography is intricately linked to the prison industrial complex (PIC). In Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* the geography of incarceration is central. Solzhenitsyn describes the invisibility, yet magnitude, of Soviet detention, sprawled across the Union, an archipelago of prisons (Solzhenitsyn 1974, 489). This notion of geography is taken up by Wynter

and Gilmore. Wynter specifically argues throughout her work that modernity and the biological conception of Man rests in the construction—from the Greeks to now—of a division between Man and the Other. Recall from the introduction that the Plantation Archipelago in the specific form of the Prison Archipelago of modernity are geographic designations of violence, there to preserve the overrepresentation of Man—as white, masculine, and (petit) bourgeois—in Human (Ibid.). Importantly Wynter's noting that the Prison Archipelago along with the Plantation Archipelago extend the social relationships beyond an analysis of labor, as a site of violence for the Human Others unfit for modernity. The Prison Archipelago coincides with the surplus of Humanity, an excess that must be torn out. Fanon discusses race through this amputation, as the necessary removal of Blackness from Humanity to preserve its centrality in whiteness (1952, 140).

On the first day of our journey we drove through multiple states across central Turtle Island, and finally to the state of Pennsylvania. On the midwest American highways, the flat expanse of dried fields and plains flew by. Maple, who grew up in southern California, joked about the monotony of the great plains compared to the geographic diversity of the southwest. Once noting the landscapes homogeneity grew tedious we chatted about Books, prison solidarity, mutual aid calls, and up-coming events. Maple and Elm were working on a flyer to raise money for our community member for their release, they discussed the content of the flyer, the fonts, and colors. This flyer was then posted on our social media and pushed to the core chat, while not explicitly asked in the group for permission, no one voiced concern. Considering fundraisers such as this have been posted before without needing consensus this is another example of a "obviously good" thing recalling Lilac's words from earlier. We also discussed a national call to

write letters for the recent Prairieland verdict, the first Antifa related case from Texas. Other local prison solidarity groups reached out to us to do a joint event and to have speakers come to discuss political repression under the Trump regime. We decided to accept the other groups requests and host the event in our space during a Saturday open-hours. We also sent a message to the core chat to confirm other members consent. These are examples of small decisions that often occur throughout Books' operations, fundraising and prison solidarity events are usually conjoined with or occur after open-hours, with flyers and posters placed by the entrance.

During a stop at a sandwich stop in Michigan, we discussed a former volunteer's criticism that Elm had too much authority and that Maple mainly spoke to support Elm. Maple and Elm found these points infuriating. Maple discussed how patronizing it was to be told she did not have any ideas of her own and that she was only parroting Maple. She continued that it was offensive because she has remained consistent for years with the project and her work as a lawyer doing many cases related to activism for little to no pay. Maple and Elm were also annoyed by the comment that Elm has too much authority. Maple remarked on how Elm did a lot of the labor, but also always asked others for assistance in tasks. Since things needed to be done and others have not taken on those labors Elm's bottom-lining has become reified into a concentration of knowledge. Significantly, Maple brought up how during this former volunteer's time, Elm was the only core volunteer who was formerly incarcerated. Maple made the point that movements for liberation need to have people who are a part of the community specifically affected—in this case (formerly) incarcerated people have the most personal experience with prisons and to abolish them requires these peoples input. This is crucial to understanding how authority and knowledge are constituted within Books. It is important to know that Elm does not

want special authority, mentioning how he even told this volunteer many times he wanted help with tasks, which they did not follow up on. This formulation resists typical understanding of authority following the trend described by Giles (2023), that bottom-liners gain knowledge and so-called authority through there dedication to the project, which is the labor of mutual aid. This mutual aid is understood and is materially an egalitarian practice, the labor Elm and the rest do is unpaid and often at the personal expense of these members.

As the sunset we arrived in Pennsylvania, Maple immediately noted the shifting landscapes. We began to climb and descend wooded hills, to the point my ears began to pressurize and pop from the pressure. When we finally arrived at our motel for the next two days it was already past midnight and we had to be up early for Maple to have a legal visit.

As people receive books from the collective, share information with there networks, and change prisons the network of Books often expands beyond the midwest. Since these letters still deserve attention and care there was a recent question of what to do with them. Should Books send to everyone no matter where? Should Books redirect letters to similar programs closer to them? Elm described that in the past letters from outside of the midwest were handled with the latter method. This is not a strict rule however, as letters from federal prisons are usually kept even if they come from out of the midwest, there are also instances of letters from state prisons in California and Oregon. The decision to send these letters to other programs is also a consideration of care for the people sending the letters, Books does not have the capacity to serve the entire prison population, but as a network of multiple programs Books is in a stronger position to build that capacity of meeting needs.

Specifically, in early February during a core meeting the decision was made to send letters from New York, as we had received many from there, to groups in New York, with consideration to the capacity of Books volunteers. In this decision there was also the stipulation of opening and reading the letters to ensure that if someone was wiring to either Books or a person in particular to keep the letter. That is there was recognition that these letters are not simple orders or requests, but also modes of connection that people need to be recognized.

The following morning we awoke at eight, got in the car, and travelled an hour to the first prison of our journey. We past the post-industrial landscape of the rustbelt, giant machinery rusted away in the sun and towns iconic of middle America. The nostalgia of fifties iconography and the so-called golden age of industrial America sprinkled the highways with diners reminiscent of *Back to the Future*. When we arrived at the prison, which was really a compound of three different prisons, off a highway across the street from a gas station and cafe, Elm remarked how people called compounds such as this a "college campus". The staff building had a large field next to it with a volleyball court and in the parking lot a basketball hoop.

The three prisons ranged from minimum, to medium, to maximum security all atop their own hill. Maple noted the earthen colors, the brown buildings with dark green roughs blending in to the surrounding hills. The entire compound covered over one square mile, although each prison was only slightly greater than one thousand square feet. The compound sat amongst rolling green hills, scarred by double razor wired fenced detention centers. The maximum security prison was also walled with turrets along them, imposing a panoptic glare. When we dropped Maple off a guard came to the car telling us we could not park there, and pointed to the visitor parking lot down the way.

Another example I will highlight is Mulberry's project to publish a book of poetry by a poet in prison, Yarrow. Mulberry and Yarrow connected over a third party app called Getting Out developed by Telmate, LLC owned fully by GTL a private corporation benefiting from these communications. Yarrow had a poem printed in a zine made by students at a local university, but the poem was cut and losing much of its meaning. This was later fixed by Mulberry to ensure the poem was printed in its original and full state.

As Books operates as a 501(c)(3) and is volunteer ran, there is a struggle to find funding. One such opportunity is through grants, recently Books received a grant for publishing. This grant was to support publishing works by people currently incarcerated. Mulberry and Yarrow have discussed using part of this grant money to publish a book of Yarrow's poetry. This reflects the autonomous projects discussed earlier, but also extends Books to its stake-holders, people in prison, as recipients of books, participate in the discussions of what books does as mutual aid. The impetus for certain projects can come directly from people in prison, this motivates the theoretical distinction of anarchist-abolition. This project attempts to connect the anarchist prefiguration to abolitionist negotiations of sociality.

After dropping Maple off, Elm and I ate at the cafe across the road, noting how eerily close, but removed from the prisons obstructed only by some trees. We then drove around the surrounding towns until it was time to pick Maple up. On the trip back to the motel we decided to check out a recently closed prison. Due to the closure, we were able to drive up to and walk around in front of the prison unmolested. The prison sat again atop a hill, perfectly hidden from view of the highway only a few hundred feet away. We were meet with strange sights. Exiting

the car the first site was a children's playground fenced in by razor wire on three sides and the remaining side towards the imposing entrance building.

Recall the decision to start sending books to the children of people in prison on their behest. This would not have been possible without the input and requests of people in prison for this service. People who requested this service live in prisons similar to this prison, with this prison itself before its closure being one of them. Prisons where contact with their children happens surrounded by razor wire. The input from people in prison for the service Books provides comes from scenes like this one. The decision-making of Books relies on these people's experiences and their needs from these very spaces.

The entrance building was a massive grey concrete structure wired halfway to the top in barbed wire. The building also stood on a steep slope bolstering its looming presence. The muted textures, imposing height, and monochrome color evoked the image of punishment. Standing in front of the entrance the American flag waved in the breeze. The prison's scale was grander due to this entrance building than any of the prisons in the complex earlier. Both were tucked away from sight off the highway. Near this second prison was the complex we send all our books to in Pennsylvania, again, off the highway, now, on a dirt road barely tucked away from sight. Elm, Maple, and I discussed prison towns, where many people from the local community were employed by these "public services".

The last prison we visited was in a small town. A quaint two story house with a side driveway and a basketball hoop looked into the yard of a prison through barbed wire. Houses on three sides surrounded the prison. This prison had turrets with windows and a large central gate in the entrance building. A wide river meandered behind the houses and up to the parking lot.

While the City has both a federal and county jail, these sites, at least, have been the site of protests, jail support, and communications to local support communities, but in rural Pennsylvania these sprinkled complexes hide the topology of prison along the geography. The work then by Books is to support these communities hidden away, through literature and communications. As mentioned previously letter's received by Books contribute to the decision-making practices of the collective. From people in these Pennsylvania we receive news on prison conditions, the types of literature people want, writings/drawings people want to share, and the types of restrictions there are on sending books. Without the input of people currently incarcerated the work at Books would be impossible, notwithstanding the need to receive communication in order to know what to send and to whom, the entire operation requires the desires and needs of people behind bars. This again resonates with Orisanmi Burton's "Captivity, Kinship, and Black Masculine Care Work under Domestic Warfare", while academics see the importance in data, the practice of letter writing is a crucial practice of care (Burton 2021: 5). There is also the crucial act of volunteers at Books writing a note when sending a package, that is the relationship is reciprocated. For example a volunteer sent a package with their note, and a few weeks later the person sent a letter back saying, "Thank you Flora for your note it made me :)." The direct communication of letter also demonstrates the participants in social relationship, that is the people in prison also see who sent the package.

Connecting the spatiality of the prison archipelago to Books, invites us to consider the ways in which practices across space, often purposely hidden space, proliferate the world-building constructions required to confront the PIC. This disparate modes of communication have a rhizomic character, the letters are lines of flights mapping new connections and practices

within the collective, through incarcerated knowledge and care, to modifying the material relations Books has to the interactions of its labor. A clear example is the spreadsheet used to understand the restrictions prisons have on receiving Books. When we receive a letter often times the author sends an update about the types of books they can receive, "Per institution policy, no hardcover or used books please" for example. The reader of the letter then updates the spreadsheet of prison restrictions noting the changes and date of receiving. This practice is small, but sediments into changing practices, this of course is often followed up by calling said prisons mailroom to confirm, but the key point is the proliferation of practice. These letter compound into the changing operations of the collective, decisions are made, we no longer send hardcover books to said prison. Moreover, these are not static, letters will come changing restrictions to be more liberal, but the protean character on the operations of the collective is the rhizomic fluidity.

The scar on the land, the Prison Archipelago, across the United States's occupation reiterates the production of the Human Others of Wynter, but as my interlocutors and myself see PIC abolition is not to destroy prisons and leave the world as it is. Recall Maple's words, PIC abolition needs to be lead by the (formerly) incarcerated, this notion is integral to the world-building of anarchist-abolition as much as it is about who and how decisions are made. What is to come of anarchist-abolition resonates with McKittrick's "Plantation Futures", "I am suggesting that when the lands of no one were transformed by plantocracy logics, firming up racial hierarchies of humanness, the question of encounter is often read through our present form of humanness, with spaces for *us* …being cast as the locations the oppressed should strive toward" (McKittrick 2013, 9). The effort in Books and its web of connection is the critical practice of engaging in social relations beyond being defined in Man's overrepresentation. The

connections to Books, the archipelago, and community members facilitate social relationships that subvert the necessary plantation logics of modernity.

Decision-making takes on a particular form, in consensus and autonomy, through this geography and the radial connections from Books. This form of decision-making is informed by people within prison, crucially, as agentive people. This is the conundrum of Mbembe (2003), "Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another" (22). It is through these social relations that engender a world beyond the plantation model, at Books is an attempt to facilitate these relationships. Navigating Gilmore's Janus faced surplus/crisis that facilities prisons and prison towns, the social relations of mutual aid act to address the crisis/surplus (recall Spade 2020) putting forth a mode of being outside racial capitalism through those whose bodies and labor are deemed surplus.

Books: Practicing and Experimenting in Anarchist-Abolition

Decision-Making, Books, and Anarchist-Abolition

This thesis investigated and navigated the different forms of decision-making happening in an anarchist-abolitionist collective based in mutual aid. In doing so my focus was on the two primary forms of decision-making, consensus and individual/small group autonomy as experiments in ethical prefiguration. In concert with these decision-making practices and labors, I demonstrated the role communication with people in prison have on these processes at Books. I focused on the use of consensus understood and implemented through the actions and evaluations of individuals to assert that at Books consensus emerges from these individuals rather than as a prescription from structure to individual of how the group ought to act. I then moved to autonomy through the autonomous projects of individuals and small groups to understand how decisions in these projects reflect on the larger scale of the collective. In doing so these autonomous projects were conceived and acted as an ethical obligation of the collective that requires these projects to reproduce itself. I finally traced a roadtrip around the midwest visiting prisons to weave together the strands of connection that people in prison exercise in pragmatic effects on the decision-making at Books. In doing so I presented how this practice of direct involvement with people in prison acts as an experimental process of actualizing anarchist-abolition.

These sites of decision-making and interaction demonstrate the character of prefiguration that occurs at Books. For consensus and autonomy to exist, requires attending to the social

relationships they emerge from rather than as disconnected administrative processes. Attending to these social relationships includes focus on the relationship the collective has to people in prison. Discussions during decision-making refer directly to the input of people in prison as stakeholders. By doing so the collective attempts to negotiate the agency of people in prison within the collective's labor and decisions.

Together these three focuses gesture towards the prefiguration Books attempts to act within. I have thus thought to provide a presentation of Books that takes it honestly and with care, even as my participation with the collective extends before and after this thesis. I therefore seek to neither fetishize nor attack the collective (Theodossopoulos 2017), but rather to look at how the processes of Books are enacted in regards the pragmatic and semantic registers used by core members. This reflects the rhizomic character of this project, there is no finality or node of a genealogical tree, rather the pursuit of what a world without prison could look like, will not be known until then. I now turn to a few ideas that could be expanded upon in understanding and performing the possible prefiguration occurring at Books.

The Precarious Position of Guidelines

Underneath the work of Books, as mentioned, are the social relationships that allow for the events and process I have described. A seemingly missing point is that of guidelines or community norms. How to deal with conflict is not known as of yet due to the informal position of these guidelines. Guidelines have been discussed largely as the step after the consensus proposal is finished. I briefly demonstrate here why these are important and why formalized community guidelines do not, yet, exist.

After an incident in which a volunteer was told to leave, a list of guidelines from the Refuge was tapped to the wall by two longtime community members. Elm, Oak, Maple, and Mulberry have all engaged with the need to put guidelines together. Elm, Maple, and Oak, the three longest volunteers, expressed the importance of creating new guidelines and not "grandfathering in" the Refuge's list. Moreover, Oak and Elm underscored the importance of this being a collective process. Rather than draft a proposal their aim was to have a core meeting to draft together. Since then, the focus remains on the consensus process and when meetings focus on internal structures the proposal is negotiated. Guidelines have thus been seen as a conversation and process after consensus has been somewhat finalized.

Guidelines are a decision-making process, specifically as it relates to maintaining a community of care for both gendered and racialized people in the space. In Books these guidelines are an explicitly defined decision-making process, with a proposal and conversations occurring during open-hours, yet these guidelines remain largely unwritten and under explored with Mulberry being the only member to add to the guidelines proposal. The guidelines of the past at the Refuge emerged from harms occurring in the community and out of necessity to establish terms of engagement. There are many factors contributing to this process. The frequency of meetings plays a major role in what decisions are made. Many of these decisions are explicitly time bound, be it planning events, a vouch forum for access to the email, or deciding a process to respond to letters asking for books to be sent to incarcerated person's children. Guidelines, as well as as the consensus process, are seen as less temporally locked and features of facilitating labor rather than a decision of labor.

As part of paying attention to collective care and individual autonomy, it would be of use to understand the process of coming up with and negotiating these guidelines as a practical example. Understanding this process and what it emerged from would be of use to similar collectives struggling to work together under the state and capitalism.

A Word on Mutual Aid

I now turn to the act of the writing of the note before sending a package. I briefly mentioned this during the third section when discussing letter writing, but I wish to describe it now in terms of mutual aid and economic systems. To connect to the larger political economy, capitalism works to fetishize commodities, that is to mystify the labor needed to produce commodities from the apparent commodity form in the market (Marx 1867 [1887]). I would argue that mutual aid is not devoid from commodity fetishism, at Books the origin of the materials such as the books themselves are not known (a part from the author's name, I mean the paper and ink). Rather mutual aid at books reflects that someone, the volunteer, read a persons letter and picked out books then marked the package with their labor, literally, through the note attached. This practice then works to, partially, de-mystify the labor of getting a Book to prison.

There is also the fact that many of the material at Books, specifically the books are donated, there is perhaps a resonance with other mutual aid projects that work with the abject material of capitalism (see Giles 2023), but this again would require further attention. Mutual aid is a practice of renegotiating the social relationships obscured by capitalism. In any regard this could be another site of investigation towards ethical prefiguration at Books or similar collectives.

What, Then, Is Anarchist-Abolition?

While Books is the attention of this thesis, it is not the only anarchist-abolitionist project. It is then important to think of other modes of anarchist-abolition to inform how it is presented here and the characteristics of anarchist-abolition both ideologically and pragmatically. The fundamental link connecting anarchist-abolition identified by Casey Goonan (2022) in their dissertation, that I draw this concept from, is the lineage and relationship to prison. That is these projects identify prison as the main site to enact these projects in relation to.

This is not to say only anarchist-abolitionist projects, and not anarchist projects writ large can do this work, but the particular focus is in, pragmatically, enacting care and relationally between people in and out of prison is central to anarchist-abolition. Other projects engaged in mutual aid and direct action such as Food Not Bombs or the Occupy Movement certainly resonate with PIC abolition, but this specific relationality is not the central ethic of meeting needs or causing direct change in these projects.

A more direct expression of anarchist-abolitionist direct action was the movement to Stop Cop City. Specifically, as a form of grounded normativity, that is the place-based approach of political action of which coalitions of multiple strands coalesce into political actions and relationships (Coulthard 2016: 254). In Stop Cop City, accomplices in this effort created a coalition effort specifically emerging from anarchist, Indigenous and Black radical traditions (Bey 2022). In any effect, the pragmatics of an anarchist-abolition are not defined in either anarchist nor abolitionist practice alone, but through the ways people take action, are informed, and who they are in communication with. That is, specifically, being informed by traditions of anarchism and abolition as they construed into their own political project. The point should be

clear that anarchist and abolition are defined more by what they do, not only what they envision, and only insofar as they are done by people grounded in relationships. They are not political parties nor wide nets, but projects of specific action which gives them their characteristics.

Abolishing The Collective

With all that I have traced throughout this thesis, it may seem perplexing to conclude with the sentiment that Books should be abolished, but this the point of Books. In an interview Elm and I did the interviewer asked, "what is the vision for Books five years from now, what is the larger plan?" I answered, "that there are no prisons that we don't exist, we are trying to abolish our work" and Elm answered, "we are not looking for libraries in every prison, we want people to be free, until then it's books until pending revolution." While mutual aid reorganizes social relationships that attempt to undermine capitalism, utilizing abject capital, repatriating commodities, and resisting commodification, these projects experiment in enacting social relationships that could exist instead of and in spite of capital relations. As briefly described, Books attempts to do this, enacting these social relationships through letters and notes attached to packages, but in this prefiguration there is also the looming presence that Books exists because of prisons. This too gestures towards the incommensurability of anarchist-abolition, anarchism, and abolition.

Books attempts to prefigure social relationships and labor practices through consensus and autonomous decision-making while at the same time struggling against the PIC, towards its abolishment. This recalls Mulberry's words that sometimes we need to destroy to create, and in Books it is both in tandem. For Books to be abolished then the prison must be abolished, for

Books to be abolished then the social relationships experimented there need to permeate. This is central to the pragmatics of anarchist-abolition at Books, it is not known what a world without prisons could look like, but for it to be then Books should not be possible. Moreover the social relationships experimented within Books, especially in regard to people in prison, attempts to facilitate the social relationships that could emerge from PIC abolition. That is, the decision-making I have traced serve as the experiments of people who base social relationships in this work to emerge directly in spite of prisons. These social relationships are important to consider for the anarchist-abolitionist working towards both a world without prisons and a world without rulers.

Appendix

Transcript 1.1:

1. Charlie 0:33.9: And so I thought a good way to like raise money to buy copies of that would
2. be to like do an event somewhere that like university people could access um and I
3. was kinda hoping since you guys are pretty good at planning events like what ideas you
4. would have for that like if we want to do a show or something?
5. Oak: Umm so first of all what is your your like what day are you thinking of having this
6. C: Day? [yea]
7. O: [Like] How many weeks in the future?
8. C: I mean I think we can plan as far out in advance as we need like put it done the line as far
9. as we need we don't need to like (.) rush it
10. O: If it's a show I suggest you need you need at least a month
11. C: Okay
12. O: Um (.) Even a month is tough 'cause bands will drop and it's gonna get even more
13. stressful as the time comes
14. C: mm hum
15. O: Um
16. Lilac: Yea
17. O: And an and you need that time to promote it
18. C: Mm hum
19. L 1:31.1: Yea I mean I think that like if if a (.) a show is a good way to raise money, but it
20. also takes like a lot of work to organize it
21. C: [Right]
22. L: [=I mean] we seen it like it just like it planning our show like for like um for like just the
23. general midwest
24. C: [Yea]

25. L: [=uh] fundraiser is good it just takes a lot of work but I think its a good idea I like the idea

26. of like having an event on the north side

End 1:55.9

Transcript 1.2

1. O 2:38.8: It should at least be feb-March please

2. C: Yes that sounds good

3. L: Yea maybe even April

4. C: Okay

5. L: Just to if there's, well we could do March

6. O: No March is totally doable

7. L: Alright that's true

8. C: Okay

9. L: I mean I I kinda think that like with this kinda stuff like I was talking to to to Elm actually

10. about this, but like I feel like with like fundraising and like shows and stuff and like events

11. like, yes like I ya know we should propose it to like the wider group of people

12. C: [mhm]

13. L:=[to like] get approval or whatever, but I feel like people can have like their pet projects

14. you know and their personal [projects]

15. C:[yea]

16. L:= that they wanna kind of spearhead. And like (.) Like (.) if yo::u and like other people

17. who are interested and I would (.) feasible be interested [like]

18. C:[ok]

19. L:=want to like help out I don't I I think just do the work you know and then like

20. C:=mhm

21. L:=ha like cause it's like something that obviously is like good

22. C: mhm

23. L: °from my [perspective°]

24. O: One hundred percent one hundred percent and and and sometimes you just need that

25. person to start [doing it]

26. C: [doing it] yea

27. O: um my other do you eh do you think it could be hosted in the university?

End 3:45.2

Transcript 1.3

1. O 5:19.9: I I know they I I know last I I know the punk scene got a little upset about how

2. much they were asking for but there's there's a spot in the Northside I'm trying to remember

3. the name °it's been around for a fucking long ass time°

4. L: There's [Susan's]

5. O: [It's a basement]

6. L: The new Sue's is on the Northside I forgot what's called though, °do you

7. know what I'm talking about?°

8. O: No I don't

9. L: Sue's is on the Westside and it just moved to the Northside

10. C: Ok

11. O: But it it it's it's difficult cause like the the difficult part is like what is your expectancy of

12. how many people are [gonna]

13. C: [right]

14. O:=show up an and like if your gonna be paying two hundred dollars for the venue

15. C: Mhm you gotta make that back °some way°

16. O: It's it's it's so diffi like

17. C: Mhm

18. O: And then (.) I I don't know I don't know again my experience is is like with the punk scene you

19. you put up a flyer you put it up in the right spot and people show up

20. L: What what are (.) what are the different ways to make? (.) I mean it could be a show

21. C: Mhm

22. L:=but what are like other?

23. O: Yea

24. C: That's a good point

25. O: That's a good point

26. L: °I mean° So you are trying to raise money specifically f:::[or us]

27. C: [for the book]

28. L:=to be able to buy this book

29. C: Yea this book yea

30. L: Or but or people could buy the book and then [donate to us]

31. C: Donate it

32. O: That is-

33. L: I fell like-

34. O: That could pay for your entrance ticket

35. C: That's what I was thinking well what I

36. O: Like you you can do a link to the Amazon or wishlist or any bookstore with the link and

37. like if you bring a copy of this that pays for your entrance as could that if that serves the

38. same purpose doesn't it

39. C: Yea yea yea yea exactly

40. L: Yea (.) though it might be kinda complicated to like have to like get your receipt and like

41. if they just give us the the straight up money then like

42. C: [I mean yea what's]

43. O: [Oh yea of course]

44. C:=what's the difference in the end

45. L: Yea it's just that it's easier for people to show [up with cash]

46. C: [Show up with cash] yea

47. L:=Than like show up with a receipt for the [book]

48. O: [Not] the receipt bring the actually copy and give it to us

49. L: Alright

50. C: Uhh [(h)]

51. L: [or if] like what if they're like oh shit I I found out about this tonight? [I can't go]

52. O:[That's true of course no] I mean that's not a requirement

53. C: Ok I feel like eh eh I mean it could be like a both situation [where]

54. L: [sure]

55. C:=it's like you either bring the book or you like bring the money to buy the book but then who would

56. bring the book? I guess

57. O: So if i if our goal is to have the most amount of people right?

58. C: Yea

59. O: I I don't I don't know would would would the students want to

60. L: I mean I think that a show is a great way to get people in the door and raise money but its not

61. always the best way to like get people super invested in like the fundraiser

62. C: Specific thing

63. L: Like li you know like our punk show I bet most people are gonna be there because they

64. like the band

65. C: They like the band yea

66. L: Like they like *The Punk Band* but the money (.)

67. O: ()

68. L: Yea it's still going towards us uh I mean I think a show is like a great way to get a lot of people but

69. like you could have-I mean the author's (.) of this book is currently incarcerated so they [can't]

70. C: [Actually] well so the also the thing with it is that he he so he was the reason why like um the

71. Statevile prison actually got like closed was cause he died in prison and so it's like basically his like

72. partner on the outside is like the one now like selling the book

73. L: It could be like like remember when we had our thing at Pilsen books with um oh my god um

74. what's his name our friend

75. C: Oh EK?

76. L: Yea EK

77. C: Yea

78. L: Um like and he was there and he talked about his experiences and he talked about his book

79. obviously um it would be a little different, but it could be kinda that we could try to figure out some

80. sort of bookstore

End 8:31.8

Transcript 1.4:

1. O 12:17.2: The show and finding bands shouldn't it it it it's gonna be difficult but were gonna
2. find I think the biggest question as still to this point is do we want to make this a very
3. intimate like
4. C: [Yea]
5. O:[=for] people who really care about the cause or you were just trying to get as much money
6. as possible I do love the bookstore idea I still fell like a show might bring more money
7. C: yea
8. L:[()]
9. O:[cause] like now now not only not only is the show but depending the venue we can sell
10. alcohol we can we can sell food [from]
11. C:[true]
12. O: *The Kitchen* like there's so many more ways that you can gather money from people not
13. not even just the door we can even ahh you know sell copies of the book ourselves
14. C:=true
15. L:=Hardcore *Hardcore Band* wants to ahm do a show for us at some point an event for us
16. and they're like a pretty big band, they're not *Hardcore Band*, they'll probably get like a
17. crowd of like fifty to a hundre-maybe
18. O:=We can we can () like we can fin we can fin we can we can we can definitely find bands
19. and like peopu-ah so many bands just don't have places to play and you offer them [and]

20. C:[yea]
21. O: =just as long as they have a decent following like we'll get we'll and they have friends or
22. whatever I think that I think that's the biggest question like I love the intimate idea of the of
23. [the]
24. C:[um] hum
25. O:=cafe like clearly people who care and like they can sit there and learn more about it and
26. obviously a show is just we're just trying to get money
27. C:=yea wai I feel like it could potentially be like ahhh two like it could be both like it could
28. be first this intimate thing and then be like the show is to raise the money then like
29. L: yea
30. O: That's a that's a lot of work but I do like that idea
31. L: I think the bookstore thing is not a crazy amount of work I think I think that shows
32. organizing a show is a lot more work
33. C: mm
34. L: and an but that's not it's worth it I mean I think we should have another benefit
35. C: mhm hum
36. L: but if we have another benefit any::ways like we could put some of the proceeds towards
37. this right?
38. C: right
39. L: like um like if we're already thinking about running a benefit in general which we are
40. We're running we're about to run one I think we should run another one in the future [if]
41. O:[We] should keep doing [actually]
42. L: [We should] keep doing benefits
43. O: Absolutely there's [like]
44. L:[um] yea like
45. O:[An]
46. L:[=We] like do *The Refuge* you know [um]
47. C: [(h)] eh

48. L: But um but I think that if it's just why not just do both I mean I feel like the bookstore
49. thing if you get [if you get a book]
50. O: [It sounds easy] to say to do both [but]
51. C:[yea] but it would be a lot of planning
52. O: but it's a lot it's a:: lo::t it is definitely like [like]
53. L: [Okay]
54. O: Like going around contacting bookstores
55. L:=I guess that's true
56. O: Like and then and then then trying to figure out then you have to go visit the spot and see
57. if there is enough like it is a:: lo::t and then if your trying to [do a]
58. L: [Okay]
59. O:=double thing where it is the same day again or maybe if you wanna it sounds like you
60. could get your club involved
61. C: mhm
62. O: and present that idea to both and then if the workload is gonna be split perfectly
63. C:[yea]
64. O:[like] it's doable it is just like
65. C:yea
66. L: maybe [I'm]
67. O:[I] like [I like]
68. L:[Maybe I'm] underestimating
69. O:= I like that idea but that seems like I don't know
70. C: Well yea I also think it would be pretty hard cause like especially if it's intimate I feel like
71. it would require like being a to be like really talking to the people who would be like doing
72. the like you know like the the [partner]
73. O: [it it] the partner might not even be interested [in the] first place
74. C:[yea]
75. L: That's totally [yea]

76. C: [yea]

77. L: We obviously have to

78. C: yea

79. L: Figure that part out

80. C: mhm m-ok

81. O: I I but yea it's it's just like yea I i-i-it if I think if like you're able to find if the school is ok

82. for being on their premise

83. C: yea

84. O: oh especially if 'cause I don't know what how many is there a huge population of of

85. university students who are in who who who dorm there

86. C: yea yea-yea-yea

87. O: Which is like there's a show and it's a few steps away from your dorm

End:15:47.6

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